

The Serial Story, A GOLDEN DESTINY, begins to-day.

# THE LONDON READER

of Literature, Science, Art, and General Information.

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No. 1989.—VOL. LXXVII.]

FOR THE WEEK ENDING JUNE 15, 1901.

[PRICE ONE PENNY.]



"YOU MUST EXCUSE MY BOY, HE IS A SPOILT DARLING, LORD VERNON, AND UNUSED TO STRANGERS," REMARKED LADY VERNON.

## EDITH'S DILEMMA.

By the Author of

"Love's Entanglement," &c., &c.

[A NOVELETTE.]

COMPLETE IN THIS NUMBER.

### CHAPTER I.

**A**LGY! Algy! this cruel silence is breaking my heart; four weary months have come and gone, and not one line have you sent me to ease my anxiety," sighed Lady Edith Vernon, as she paced the soft, damp sands, and gazed

yearningly to the grey sea, which gurgled at her feet in soft, white little billows that looked for all the world like ridges of virgin snow.

Her eyes, darkly blue, resembling dew spangled violets, were sweeping the horizon bedimmed with tears that at last fell in hot, scalding drops on her slender hands that were clasped together in pitiful sorrow.

Her hair, just caught by the healthful spring wind, tossed about her face a ruddy golden cloud, and fell about her in wild luxuriance, as if she took little heed of her beauty now that she was fretting for a form and a voice far away.

Her thoughts had spanned oceans, lands, and even deserts, and penetrated into that far region, West Africa, where her venture-

some husband, led by his love of adventure and sport, had betaken himself.

"If I only knew," she moaned. "It is this sickening suspense which is so hard to bear!"

The beauty of the scene was lost upon her; its white cliffs and leafy ravine which parted the dark slate coloured blocks that were nearly hid by greenery, where the birds built their nests and sang their lovely ditties to their sweethearts and wives.

So abstracted was Lady Vernon with her distressful thoughts, that the figure of a young woman with fluttering pink ribbons flying from her cap, caught by the fresh sea breeze, came, panting for breath, and stood in her presence before she even saw her.

"My lady, I've run so fast, please,

**A GOLDEN DESTINY**

*will quicken the pulse  
and thrill the imagination.*

because Mr. Reeves has just come, and sent me to tell you; he says it's important," she gabbled, breathlessly.

"Mr. Reeves, Deborah! why should he come here?" she asked, a spasm of pain and terrible foreboding clutching at her heart, chilling it with a dull, cold dread which her lips refused to shape, as she, with tottering steps, left the smiling rippling sea for the shore, where, peeping through a rift of verdant foliage stood a beautiful bungalow of a house; whose woods, clustering around it, were alive with the ravishing songs of myriads of birds—larks, thrushes, and bullfinches—while mingling with their delightful songs came the cuckoo's greeting to the dwellers of the fair green earth, that summer was nigh, and chill biting winds had fled for a brief few months.

As her ladyship entered the porch, which was a tangled skein of climbing creepers, a thoughtful gentlemanly man crept forward, his face wearing a pitiful anxious expression.

"What is the matter, Mr. Reeves?" she stammered, her lovely young face ashen in its pallor. "I feel sure something has happened; do not, I implore you, keep me in suspense!"

Very gently he led her into the pretty drawing-room, where the sweet odour of countless flowers tried to outvie each rival's delicious scent.

"Lady Vernon, I dare not deny my errand here is a sad one; but try and summon all your strength to bear it with fortitude for, indeed, you will need to!"

"My husband," she gasped, "he—he is dead, I know it; I can see it in your face," and she swayed forward like a tossed reed caught in a sudden hurricane.

He bowed his head in reply; he felt unable to repeat the unhappy truth.

"He fell a victim to his undaunted courage and love of adventure," he observed, breaking the awful silence. "Savages are treacherous and cruel."

"And they have murdered my darling!" she added. "Oh, Algy! how I begged of you to give up that wild project; oh, my martyred husband! I holding her trembling hands tight to her heart to stop its mad, agonizing pain.

"The dispatch which tells the sad news says that his valet, poor Conrad, shot himself, and thus escaped the inhuman torture of his captors; may not Lord Vernon have followed his example. Let us hope so, at least."

"If I could only think so," she sobbed, "even that would be one ray of comfort, even that," and the rings of her soft white hands gleamed mockingly that he had placed there with such pride a few short months back.

"My task is not, I regret to say, completed," he observed, after a painful pause, clearing his throat. "Misfortune has, indeed, fallen on the house of Vernon. My late client's brother, who, of course, is the next heir, lies at Vernon Park dying."

"Dying!" she repeated, aghast. "Is my cup of bitterness not full yet? Widowed and comparatively a beggar, and all in a few short months!"

"It is to avert, in some measure, the last catastrophe that I am here to-day especially. Your brother-in-law has entrusted me with a mission; in fact, to conduct you to Vernon Park immediately."

"For what purpose?" she faltered, stemming with difficulty the tears that would persist in running down her cheeks.

"You know what will happen at the death of Lord Vernon? The whole of the estates and property revert to a man whom both brothers detest; and, I believe, not without cause."

"How can this heir be kept out of the property if it is his right, Mr. Reeves?"

"By stratagem, Lady Vernon. We lawyers are sometimes called upon, in our client's interests, to use the subtle cunning of the fox to gain a point. As the widow of the late lord you only receive one-third of the income now in the funds. The magnificent estates would be lost; but, as the widow of the last Vernon, he can bequeath everything to you."

"I don't understand!" she protested, in wondering perplexity.

"I see I must be more explicit," clearing his throat to plunge into the task which he felt was not an easy one with such a gulleless, candid nature as this girl widow, who was as open and frank as the glorious sunshine that was dancing through the windows roguishly in its merriest mood.

"Lord Vernon's last wish is to marry you before his demise, so that you may inherit the property."

"Marry me!" she murmured in amazement, a burning flush suffusing the tearful face that an instant before was the hue of parian marble.

"It will only be a matter of form. The doctors have given up all hopes of his recovery," Mr. Reeves rejoined, quickly.

"But I am a perfect stranger to him! He has never seen me!" she persisted.

"What does that matter, my lady? He knows his brother was devoted to you; and he has heard your true character, and thinks you a lady worthy of the high position he now wishes to confer upon you on his dying bed."

"Why should he wish to benefit a person so utterly unknown to him?" she questioned, incredulously.

"For the sake of his brother, whom he loved dearer than anything in life; and his illness, no doubt, was accelerated by the shock of his sudden death."

"And he wants me to accompany you to Vernon Park?" she observed, in a half-dazed tone, for the interview was almost too harrowing for her to bear in her widowed sorrow and keen anguish much longer.

"Yes. Will you consent?"

"I know not what to say?" a fresh burst of sobs choking her utterance. "It is all so unreal, so cruel! and I am alone, with no one to turn to for advice. Heaven guide me aright in this step you ask me to take!"

"How free from ambition this beautiful, child-like woman is!" the man of the world thought, with increased admiration. "Not even the dazzling prospect of becoming one of the richest peeresses in England moves her one whit."

Aloud he said, gravely,—

"Remember, it is a dying man's wish; and that man your husband's only kith and kin. And now permit me to wait ten minutes for your decision?"

"You need not give me that, Mr. Reeves. I have already decided I will come with you. My dear husband's brother's last wish shall not be disregarded by me."

He opened the door and watched the pearl grey clad figure float out into the hall, her beautiful head, in its tangle of gold, bowed down with a grief too crushing even for the good-natured domestics who, on the alert, felt sure that some terrible calamity had fallen on their young mistress too sacred to question or intrude upon.

Deborah, in silence, followed her to her room, and with dexterous haste carried out her hurried instructions and dressed her for the journey.

"Go to Ransom's and order mourning for you all," Edith said, as the girl clasped a warm cloak around her, lined with sable, the last present Lord Vernon had given her,

telling her, with a gay little laugh, that she was only a wee birdie that required a coat of fur till her own feathers made their appearance.

"Oh! my lady, then it is too true; and I shall never see our dear master again," faltered Deborah, no longer able to hold her peace.

"Please do not make it too hard for me to endure. I am starting on a journey and am ill," her mistress urged in a weak voice, tottering towards the door.

"My lady, do I beseech you, drink a glass of wine or something," she entreated, looking at the agonized face with a world of tender pity in her kind grey eyes.

"Yes, I want strength to travel, Deborah. I was forgetting;" this with a childish yielding that was touching to witness, as she swallowed a glass of port, and then hastened down to the drawing-room, where Mr. Reeves was anxiously counting the flying moments, repeater in hand, knowing the necessity of reaching London, where they had to catch another train, and endure forty minutes' more travelling ere they could reach the dying man's bedside.

Lady Vernon sat back in the furthestmost corner of the railway carriage, lost in a dreamy retrospect of despairing misery while her companion engrossed his attention in his newspaper, feeling the bereaved young widow would rather be left to her own thoughts.

Like a rift of summer sunlight piercing a dark tomb came the memory of that bright May-day when she first met her fate at a botanical fête, and Lord Vernon presented her with the bouquet of roses he had taken a first prize for, and stole her heart in exchange, luring her by the witchery of his fine presence and dark, passionate eyes—eyes that gazed her young innocent heart away.

Then the blissful days of enchantment that followed, when he sought her in every nook and corner to get but one sweet word from those rose lips that, to him, resembled only rosebuds steeped in morning dew.

Then the rapture of his confession and first kiss of love when their natures seemed merged into one soul—the wedding-morn, when he made her, though an orphan and penniless, a bride, and whispered that she was more precious to him than if she had been the daughter of a hundred earls.

Quick to follow were the closing scenes, after their too brief bliss, in the pretty bungalow down by the sea, where he laughingly declared he would enjoy a whole year's seclusion away from the busy haunts of men while Vernon Park was being rebuilt and thoroughly refurbished and renovated to receive its charming young mistress. And up to now had not it been his desire to show her their home himself in all its complete beauty and welcome her on its threshold?

Then that fatal project seized him to take that trip to Africa to shoot big game, and to bring back trophies to lay at her feet.

She could feel his clinging lips pressed to hers, his loving embrace, as she bade him a last sobbing good-bye! and how fondly he chided her for the tears that would not be denied, and his last words seemed to ring in her ears,—

"Heaven bless and guard my sweet wee wife!"

Then, when he had rushed away, the dark desolation she felt, a kind of awful presentiment of evil which she could not stifle or bury.

And as she mused the sunshine and azure sky seemed to mock her misery, to gibe at the hot scalding tears that kept rising to her eyes.

The undulating meadows, the smiling farms and cottages, half-smothered in their





green robes, all spoke of joyous life and restful peace—a peace she felt never would be hers again on earth.

"Paddington at last!" Mr. Reeves exclaimed with relief. "I only hope we shall be fortunate enough to catch the train for Bevanstoke."

She caught her cloak about her with a little shiver, and took his proffered hand passively, and allowed him to lead her to a cab, as if her senses were numbed and she powerless to assert her own will.

"I really must insist upon your taking some refreshment, Lady Vernon," Mr. Reeves remarked, gravely, when they reached Waterloo and the tickets were procured. "We have eleven minutes to wait. A basin of soup with a glass of wine in it will do great things. I will join you in one myself."

"As you like," she replied, docilely, trying to swallow it to please him. "I have been thinging, and oh! Mr. Reeves, the agony of this journey I shall never forget. I feel flying into space, to some unknown region of torture."

"You are feverish and fatigued. The unhappy events following one upon the other account for your feelings, Lady Vernon."

She sighed, but gave him a mute glance, expressive of her thanks, which was most touching and pathetic in its childish clinging gratefulness, and somehow the cute, hard-headed lawyer felt a dimness, very suggestive of moisture, arising in his keen, sharp grey eyes, and a marble-like substance about the region of his throat.

## CHAPTER II.

LIKE some horrible nightmare she found herself being led hurriedly up a soft yielding carpeted staircase, lined with Italian statuary, the exquisite forms of most of the heathen goddesses, holding flowers, ferns and delicate Roman lamps.

She remembered her husband mentioning to her this innovation, a tribute to her, because she admired the works of the great Italian masters in Florence while on their wedding tour.

But she had very little time to notice anything particularly, for crimson velvet curtains shrouding a doorway, were silently caught up by Mr. Reeves, and she found herself in a half-darkened room from which the bright light had evidently been carefully excluded.

"Has she come?" asked a feeble voice from a magnificently canopied bed of rich, ruby velvet and turquoise blue silken fringes.

"Yes, my lord, Lady Vernon is here," replied Mr. Reeves in soft modulated tones. The dying man raised himself on his elbow with a gesture of eager impatience.

Mr. Reeves led his companion to the bedside.

"You have, of course been told everything, the motive for this strange step?"

"Yes," she faltered.

"And you consent?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Remember, it is only a form; but one that I owe to your unborn child."

A flood of deep crimson leaped to her pale face at this allusion to her coming maternity.

"You know this?" she breathed.

"My brother wrote to me and entreated me to make his child my sacred care in the event of anything happening to him. The blow has descended on our house tenfold, for I, also, am struck down."

"Is there no hope?" she said, tremulously, "it is so hard to be cut off in one's prime."

"Heaven's will be done. I am perfectly

resigned," he answered almost firmly, "the bitterness of death is now conquered."

A gentleman, evidently a doctor, stepped quietly from behind a gorgeous screen that stood beside the bed, and Mr. Reeves conducted the terror-stricken girl from the room down into the drawing-room.

Could death be hovering over the portals of this fair English home, was the thought that struck her as the scene presented before her of brightness and beauty met her eyes.

Maize plush, and rose-coloured satin sofas, chairs and curtains, a polished pine floor with here and there a tiger or Oriental rug; flowers and the warble of birds in costly gilt cages, and to crown all a portrait of herself painted by an Italian master during the honeymoon.

She gave a sudden gasp of dismay at the shock, for it opened the wound afresh to see the loving thought in every detail of her martyred husband.

Mr. Reeves ventured to suggest he should ring the bell for some refreshment, to change the current of her unhappy thoughts.

With listless apathy she nodded assent, and then he left her, pending the marriage ceremony.

"Could I ever have smiled like that?" she soliloquized, unable to resist the temptation of gazing at her own counterfeit, and turning towards one of the splendid Venetian mirrors to compare her poor, pale tear-stained face; "no, it is impossible!"

She was not far wrong, either, in her opinion, for few people would have conceived she was the same smiling, beautiful Hebe, her glistening, snowy bridal robes sweeping a flower-strewn path, her eyes latent with fun and laughter.

She turned from it with a bitter sigh just as the housekeeper entered to ask her what she would take.

"A cup of tea, if you please," she said, gently, in response.

The good woman could perceive the lady was overwhelmed with some gnawing grief, so, with innate tact, she curtsied and quickly left the room.

An elegant, appetising repast soon was laid before her—spring chicken, a tiny crystal bowl of salad, a gold dish of strawberries, accompanied by rich cream wafers of pale yellow toast—everything to tempt the appetite.

But she scarcely glanced at them; all she touched was the tea; she felt food would choke her.

After what seemed to her an eternity she was aroused by the entrance of Mr. Reeves.

"The clergyman has arrived, and everything is ready, Lady Vernon; will you come?"

She rose and followed him in a half-dreamy fashion, as if she were walking in her sleep.

Standing beside the bed was a minister in canonical robes, the doctor, and the dying man.

A shaded lamp sent weird shadows into the corners and recesses of the room, conflicting with the dying crimson shafts of the setting sun.

The sublime opening of the marriage service commenced, and for a second time, within a year, the widowed Edith found herself a bride, but a bride of death.

When the service and the signatures were concluded the minister, with a courteous inclination, withdrew.

"Come, sit here," Lord Vernon said, motioning her to a chair near him. "I want to speak to you, to confess all."

"Do not, I beg, distress yourself. I owe you so much that a breath wasted in talking to me would weigh on my soul. I can

see how noble, how generous you are in this grand act to the dead, and to his unborn child. Oh! that Heaven would alter the decree of the doctor and give you back strength."

"Heaven forbid," he said, covering his face with both his hands, as if to evade some terrible avenging spirit.

"Why do you say that?" she asked, a world of tender compassion in her voice.

"Because death is the only refuge, the only escape; to live would be everlasting remorse, a blighted, poisoned existence, too terrible to contemplate."

"I understand," she murmured, brokenly, a pang of shame quivering on her sensitive lips. "You shrink from the strange bondage this noble deed has placed you in; am I right?"

"Yes, for I love the fairest and truest of women, and she is my plighted wife; when she hears of this she will believe me false, and regret the love and faith she has placed in me; it is hard either way."

"Would that I could heal your wounded soul, noble heart," she said, soothingly, holding out her hand on which two golden badges of wifehood now gleamed, one fresh and bright, placed there but a few minutes ago by the fragile trembling hand that grasped hers with a fervent pressure.

"Good-bye," he murmured, faintly. "I am tired," and sank exhausted, alarming her terribly, lest the excitement had been too much for his strength.

Tottering, thoroughly overcome with the excitement she had undergone, she went to the bell and summoned the medical attendant, and then departed with the weight of ten years added to her young life.

She found Mr. Reeves awaiting her in the drawing-room, evidently anxious to get the business over, and return to the busy metropolis and get into harness again.

"Can I be of assistance to you, Lady Vernon, in any way?" he asked, after handing her a copy of her marriage certificate and other necessary documents.

"No, thanks; all I require is a vehicle of some kind to convey me to the station."

Mr. Reeves looked at the lady with dazed amazement, as if he could not credit he had heard aright.

"Do I not make myself understood? I cannot wonder if I do not, for I am quite distraught."

"Surely, my lady, you will never leave your home and husband to-night?"

"I would rather perish on the roadside than stay here," she said agitatedly.

"Is this wise?" he interposed. "Pardon me for presuming to question your intentions, it is with the purest motive, I assure you, that I tender my advice, which is to stay, under all circumstances, until the end. It is your home. Doubly your home."

"I am quite sensible of your earnest desire to serve me, but on no account could you prevail upon me to stay in this house now my mission here is concluded. Each moment I come across some memento of my dear lost husband—household treasures collected together in our travels, and sent here to beautify our home! A mist of tears welled into her eyes, and her sweet face was drawn with anguish as she recalled that sweet, dead past. "Each time my eyes dwell upon them the wound seems rent afresh!"

"But, eventually, when the cloud is raised, you will, of course, make Bevanstoke your home?"

"No! emphatically no! The associations would be harrowing!"

Mr. Reeves pursued the subject no further, but quietly took his leave, after making arrangements for the carriage to be in readiness, according to her ladyship's instructions.

As he made his way briskly on foot to the station, he murmured to himself,—

"There's a fine property which the late lord has just spent a little fortune in rebuilding and decorating for his bride likely to be shut up and left to the tender mercies of the rats and mice."

### CHAPTER III.

It was the evening following the solemn nuptials between Lord Roland Vernon and the widow, Edith, Lady Vernon, and still the pulse of life lingered in the weakened frame.

The heavy velvet curtains were drawn back from the window by the orders of the stricken man.

The cloudless beauty of the evening sky, bright with the peaceful radiance of the stars, shone in upon the lonely, weary watcher.

"How long will this burden of life last?" he murmured, with a sigh of hopeless bitterness. "It is hard to die; yet they tell me I am weak! How long will it be before I solve the greatest of all problems—the problem of death!"

The silvery gleam of the evening star, or rather planet, luminous and brilliant, stole through the window, and cast its bright reflection on a mirror.

"Star of promise, are you?" he mused, "come to cheer me in my dark journey through the valley of shadows, to buoy up my sinking courage to victory? Blessed star, guide my tottering steps, for I need aid!"

His hands stretched forth towards the illumined sky beseechingly, as if invoking that blessed angel peace to descend upon his storm-tossed soul, to breathe into it resignation.

A soft footstep crossing the thick velvet pile carpet arrested his attention, and his wan, haggard eyes turned to meet his patient medical friend who had never left him for more than an hour at a time ever since his dangerous illness.

Doctor Ambrose turned up the reading-lamp on the table by the side of the bed, looked at his patient intently, and held his hand for several minutes to study the beats of its pulse.

An expression of intense, anxious relief stole into his earnest countenance after releasing the fragile hand.

"Heaven be praised!" he ejaculated fervently. "It is almost miraculous!"

"What are you saying?" queried his lordship, sharply.

"That there is a turn for the better, my lord! That divine providence has combined with our poor skill, and the danger is past."

"What!" he gasped, raising himself with a sudden feverish strength on his elbow. "Is it possible that I shall live?"

"Yes; more than possible, for the dew of life is bathing your forehead, and your hands are damp with it, replacing the consuming fire that was carrying you away from all you prize and hold dear!"

"Better had you told me I had but one more hour to live than this," he murmured, brokenly, clasping his fingers together in mute agony piteous to witness.

"His brain is evidently weakened," was the doctor's inward comment. "I must rally him with a little stimulant from this nervous prostration."

He poured out a glass of wine and held it to his lips.

"Would that I could thank you for the noble part you have taken in this fatal recovery! but I cannot. You have recalled me back to a life of torture, of remorse bitter than a thousand deaths."

"Morbid fancies created by sheer weakness," he interposed, gently.

"The fancies of a man whose aim and hope of life has perished," he retorted, earnestly. "Oh! it is too hard, too heavy for thy servant to bear with patience."

"Be calm," his friend implored, laying his cool hand on his poor restless ones, soothingly; "this wonderful reprieve must be for some wise purpose; it has been decreed by the greatest of all Physicians."

With a long-drawn despairing sigh Lord Vernon turned his face to the wall and fell into a calm, restful sleep; tired nature came to his rescue in spite of himself to raise him from his torpor.

Doctor Ambrose was a true oracle concerning the recovery of Lord Vernon, for a few days more found him seated in an easy chair propped up with pillows.

In a fortnight he was pronounced fit to travel.

"Travel!" he groaned. "Henceforth I shall be a miserable wanderer, finding no abiding place to rest my hungering spirit and weary feet."

A settled gloom seemed to have descended upon his fair head, that only time and change could lift, so the doctor said.

But he shook his head incredulously as he prepared to take his leave of the fairest domain on the face of the earth, eager to shake the dust of it from his feet.

It was a glorious summer morning when he bade the home of his fathers good-bye; there had been an early morning shower, and sparkling drops, like crystal tears, shined tremulously on the shrubs and leaves of the bursting roses, and the soft, emerald turf looked like a rich carpet.

Yet all the beauty of the scene failed to extract one sigh of regret from the man who was leaving its seductions with the fixed intention of never looking upon it again.

In less than an hour he was whirled into the seething, busy hive called London, where men and women pushed and jostled each other unceremoniously, perfectly reckless as to opinions and consequences.

He hailed a hansom in the station yard, and drove to Kensington, the elite of suburbs, where everyone with a good account at their banker's flock, because it is hall-marked by the upper ten.

He looked very handsome and distinguished, though thin and pale.

There was a well set, high bred air in the sharp, decisive tread and lofty way he held his head.

His mouth, which was as finely curved as a woman's, was sweet and yielding, denoting a want of will and resolution; but at the moment that his slate-gloved hand held the huge brass knocker of a palatial residence in Queen's Gate it fell into pained lines born of some settled purpose.

The man-servant who opened the door started back with respectful surprise at the change illness had evidently wrought upon him.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he stammered, "I was took by surprise, you look so different."

"No wonder, Clark, seeing that I have risen from the dead," he replied; "but tell me, is Miss Vange at home?"

"Yes, Mr. Vernon," he returned, swiftly, leading him upstairs into a *bijou* little room, a marvel of pale turquoise blue and dainty lace and pretty white wicker furniture.

He threw himself down on a soft inviting couch covered with an opossum skin, and covered his face with his hands.

In his abstraction he did not hear the door open till two soft white arms were entwined round his neck, and a cloud of nut-brown hair fell in waves about him, its perfume stealing like sweet vapours upon his very senses.

"Adah," he said, trying to unloose those clinging arms, "I am not worthy of your dear love; it is to tell you with my own lips that I am here."

With a look of incredulous wonder she freed him, and knelt on a cushion to gaze into the pallid, sad face of the man she had surrendered up her young heart to in all its rich freshness and loyal faith and trust.

"You have been ill, Roland. Oh! why did you not write or send to me? But (and here she faltered as if afraid to utter the dismal word that sprang to her lips), you have also sustained a loss," her eyes resting on the deep crape band of his hat that lay beside him.

"Yes, my brother," he replied, sadly; big tears welled into her blue eyes—tears of pure sympathy, "and I am the last of my race in the direct line; but this is not what I came here to tell you. I have come to say good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" the girl repeated, in a dull, dazed way, as if some blight had fallen on her from above. "Do you know, Roland, dear, you are breaking my heart?"

"Heart!" he groaned, bitterly. "If you knew how mine is bleeding now you would pity me; oh! my darling, my precious love! if you knew all you would loathe me as you would some leper. I am a base coward; but I was in the jaws of death!"

She listened to his wild incoherent language—the dewy velvet bloom of her fair face faded into ashy whiteness, her eyes dilated with vague alarm at his strange words.

"I do not understand," she faltered. "I can see you have been very ill, and deeply depressed by your sad bereavement; but, beyond that I cannot go; do in pity's name tell me all!"

"Adah, you will hate me; oh, my darling! I am but a poor weak wretch when I should be strong for both our sakes."

"Be brave, dear Roland!" she urged. "I am ready to hear your confession. If you have erred, my love is strong enough to pardon you and to plead to the All Pitying One above to bless and keep you from temptation."

Sublime love shone in her beautiful innocent eyes as she took his listless hands in hers, and poured out those words of pure devotion.

"Listen, then," he said, clenching his teeth together with a firm resolve to reveal all, and so-end the cruel suspense she was suffering. He proceeded,—

"While hastening back to see my lawyer on the unhappy tidings of his death I rashly remained on deck during a heavy pelting storm; the result was a chill, and inflammation of the lungs. When I reached London I went to my lawyer more dead than alive. He immediately had me conveyed to our home, which was then awaiting the arrival of my brother and his young wife. Then came excruciating pain, followed by a weakness akin to death. The doctors gave up all hopes of my life, and in my despair and utter weariness of everything earthly, I (here he paused as if for breath)—I—well, the truth is—the property, unless I married, would revert to a cousin, a man we both dislike."

"Married!" her frozen lips echoed, shrinking from him appalled at those terrible words.

"I told you you would recoil from me," he said, with grim despair.

"Roland, Roland, what do you mean?" she asked, wringing her hands in piteous helplessness. "Married; did I hear aright?"

"Yes, I have married my brother's widow; but, oh! have mercy!" as he put forth his hands entreatingly towards her; "have pity; it was done at the



moment when I believed the next would be my last."

She tottered to a chair, her sweet face rigid, her heart throbbing madly, her pretty, bright eyes clouded with passionate pain, the ruthless blow was struck at last that shattered all her young hopes.

Not a sound, except the regular tick of the timepiece on the mantel-shelf, could be heard in the room, till at last he could endure the silence no longer, and he rose and stood before the crouching form of the girl he loved with a love stronger than death, and contemplated the havoc made in one brief half hour of her blithe happiness, all her girlish beauty seemed faded, as with hands tightly clasped to her heart, and full, tearless eyes fixed on vacancy, she sat on, mute with a dumb despair.

He fell on his knees by her side and caught those icy hands in his, and chafed them with his own fevered ones in a delirium of anguish.

"Adah!" he implored, "my heart's own love, look at me, speak to me, this frozen silence stabs me to the heart; Heaven knows I have never strayed from you in one thought, my love is eternal. The woman I gave the name of wife to I have never even seen! She stood by my bed, and I heard her voice, a low, sweet one, that is all I could recall. I swear by all that I hold most sacred that my fealty to you is true till death."

"Yet you placed this barrier between us," she moaned; "could you not have been true in death as well as life? Do you forget the compact we made last Christmas when the bells were ringing in the new year, to be constant and true to each other until life's end? Look at the ring you gave me then, and it's sacred motto, 'Mizpah,' and now all is a mockery."

"Reproach me, revile me," he interposed, with humble resignation; "it lessens the torment I have suffered alone, unseen by any eye but Heaven's. When I am wandering in far off lands, carrying the burden of my cross, as Christian did, some scrap of comfort may visit my lonely hours, in submission to your just condemnation of one who was tempted to commit a rash action to serve a dead brother, and was bitterly punished, though justly, by the idol of his heart."

"I am vanquished, Roland," she cried, stretching forth her hands deprecatingly; "you are not to blame; it was our cruel, remorseless destiny, and we must accept it as inevitable; but what has become of this—this lady?" her lips refused to frame the odious term wife.

"I cannot say! She left the Hall as soon as the fatal knot was tied, so they tell me."

"And you have no idea of her whereabouts?"

"None whatever, unless she has returned to Devon."

"What if she should claim her rights? I mean her position as your wife?" she suggested, a spice of jealousy in her voice.

"My very soul revolts at the mere thought," he said, with a shudder; "no mortal power on earth would force me to feel otherwise. She is my brother's widow, sacred to me as if a bride of the church."

An impression of intense relief escaped her at his emphatic, solemn assurance.

"Are you not sorry now that I was spared to relate this story of a doctor's error?" he added miserably.

"No, a thousand times no!" she responded, eagerly, her true, loyal nature asserting itself. "While you live our hearts are one in thought! It matters not how far away we may be from each other,

the union of our souls can never be severed."

"But your sweet life will be wasted! I dare not accept such a sacrifice," he pursued. "I do not say forget me, but seek happiness with someone better and worthier than I. It would be the act of a villain to bind you to such an unholy compact."

"I shall never marry while you live!" she replied, firmly.

"May your release not be far distant," he murmured. "Maybe it will not, for I intend going out to Africa to find my brother's remains, and bring them over here for Christian burial. That is my first plan, you see, my lost love! I feel it imperative on me now to have some purpose, and that an active one, to keep me from my own dark thoughts."

She was sobbing quietly at the dreary exile before her noble, martyred lover in those burning lands of poisonous vapours; not of herself, lonely and wretched, as she was sure to be without the sweet hope which had made each day a joy, because it lessened the time when she fondly believed they would meet at the altar never more to part.

He gathered her weeping to his breast, and kissed the hot, blistering tears as they fell, murmuring all the tenderest words into her ears till she felt faint and giddy.

"Heaven help me!" he faltered; "and bless and protect you; I must go!" he said.

"What?" she gasped, clinging to him in a wild, convulsive burst of frantic despair as she realised that the exquisite, torturing moment had at last come when they must perhaps look their last upon each other.

"Good-bye! my much-wronged love! good-bye!" he breathed, feeling he dare not trust himself to remain another minute, lest he should lose all command over himself.

He held her for one more instant, yielding, passive in his arms, and gave one last yearning, absorbed look into her face, as if he was committing each feature to the tablets of his heart, never to be erased, then released her gently, and laid her on a couch, her face rigid, her eyes closed in merciful oblivion.

The tension on her nerves had been too heavy, and the brave young nature succumbed at last.

He summoned her maid, and placed five sovereigns in her hand, and entreated her to watch over her, then fled from the house, never daring to look back, lest his courage should fail him, and compel him to return.

#### CHAPTER IV.

In a very short time Lord Vernon was seated in a comfortable apartment in his hotel leading off Piccadilly, which he always frequented when paying a visit to the metropolis.

He was busy writing letters with nervous energy, as if he must kill thought by hard work of some kind.

The sleek, suave waiter knocked at the door while he was scratching away with lightning speed with his pen.

He glanced up with a bored expression at the interruption.

"If you please, my lord, a gentleman wishes to see you," presenting a silver tray with a card on it.

"What can he want?" he thought, with a gesture of irritation. "Show Mr. Mansell in," turning to the man sharply.

Soon after the waiter's retreat a young man about the same age as Lord Vernon stood in the doorway, hat in hand.

Any one could have seen at a glance they were allied by blood. There was the same

lithe, sinuous figure, graceful and gentlemanly, and, excepting a different expression of features, a great resemblance.

"Dear boy, I am so glad to see you in the flesh!" he said, holding out his hand cordially; "upon my soul I am!"

Lord Vernon looked up at his visitor with sheer amazement as he shook hands with him.

"You look as if you don't quite believe me," he continued. "How is it, cousin, that you generally misjudge me?"

A pang of self-reproach seized him at the home thrust.

"Who knows, perhaps, after all, it is only prejudice, and an unjust one, too?" flitted across his mind, softened by the suffering he had undergone of body as well as mind.

"I trust I have not wrongfully. I am no saint, Ramsay, to condemn my fellows, goodness knows."

"But you confess now that you have, at times, ascribed a few sins to my credit which have been, after all, imaginary, eh?" this good humouredly.

"Well—er, you see, Ramsay, I am only human, and likely to err in more ways than one; but what brings you here, and how did you know I was in town?"

"I met Paxton at the Guard's Club, where I was lunching with a friend, and he told me you had arrived and taken up your quarters here."

"It is a miracle, though, I am here, Ramsay; never has man been nearer the gates of the other world than I!"

"That is one of my reasons for calling, dear boy," this insinuatingly, "to congratulate you from my very heart on your recovery."

This avowal touched Lord Vernon to the core.

"How cruelly I have misjudged him," he thought, thoroughly abashed. "I believed him counting the hours that would place me in eternity, and he in my place."

In a perfect contrite revulsion of feeling he replied,—

"Ramsay, I thank and believe you."

"Then we are more than cousins, dear boy, we are friends; well, this is as it should be, considering we are the last of our race, and poor Algernon is gone. I suppose you will settle down soon at the Hall?"

"No, I am off to Africa to seek for poor Algy's remains."

He gave a soft whistle of surprise, and caressed his fair moustache, his brown, cruel, cold eyes snakily resting upon his cousin.

"Rather a hazardous project, isn't it, to carry out alone? Surely you haven't just escaped from kingdom come to wish to get sent there with scant ceremony; savages have a knack of dispatching their victims, too, in anything but a nice and comfortable way."

"I shall have to take my chance, my mind is fully made up; no advice could change my purpose," he returned, with dogged persistency.

"Well, since you are resolved, I proffer my company and poor services in the cause. I could not think of permitting you to risk a dangerous enterprise alone."

"You mean it?" exclaimed Lord Vernon, his face flushing with pleased astonishment. "Then I accept your offer with the same frankness as it is tendered. Ramsay, you are a good fellow; mind, you go as my guest."

This was a delicate hint to let him know that he would pay all expenses, and so relieve him of any kind of embarrassment.

"And if you have nothing better to do come to dinner to-morrow, and then we will arrange our future plans and route."

Ramsay Mansell accepted the invita-

tion with an assumption of eager friendliness, and shook hands heartily with his kinsman.

"My Lord Vernon, you think yourself very cute," he soliloquised, as he strolled into Piccadilly, "but you are only a puppet in my hands. So you thought that sly matrimonial affair was safe in the keeping of Reeves; but lawyers shouldn't keep clients waiting in a room alone where important documents are; it is a deuced bad habit."

And he chuckled a long demoniacal laugh, and crossed over to the Green Park, spick span and perfect in dress from his white cloth gaiters to his glossy silk hat.

He walked on till he reached the Criterion; here he stopped, and then entered with a bland, though artificial smile on his finely-cut features.

Two or three smiling Hebes pushed forward to serve him, between the magnificently decorated stage, for so these bars seem to the simple country folk when their eyes first catch sight of the glitter of coloured glass and ferns and exotics.

He was evidently an *habitué* of the place.

"Sherry and orange bitters?" one of them asked, demurely, a tall, queenly girl, with a creamy complexion, but otherwise devoid of colour.

"If you please," he answered, gallantly, "and take pity and relieve me of this," detaching a dainty tea rose bud from his button hole.

"For me?" she said, proudly. "You are too thoughtful."

"That would be impossible where you are concerned," he whispered; and she simpered and blushed with pleasure at his great condescension and evident admiration for her pretty self.

Could she have known that the slender white hand which held the wine glass to his lips was as fierce and cruel as a tiger's claw she would have flown from him with terror.

The next evening he presented himself at Lord Vernon's with military punctuality, garbed this time with delicate consideration, in mourning.

His host brightened up a bit when he entered, and gave him a friendly welcome, touched still more by this clever little idea of the sombre garments.

"You will find the viands excellent, Ramsay, but my society flat, so you must let one counterbalance the other," he observed, as they commenced with a dish of native oysters. "If you take my advice you try the oyster omelettes, they are really fine."

"This kind of thing will spoil us for our African repasts," he laughed. "I expect we shall have to put up with the culinary skill of some dusky maiden who uses only one pot for everything, and whose dirty fingers will be the only seasoning."

"In that case we had better go as well provided as possible with tinned stuff," interposed Lord Vernon. "Anything would be preferable to that unsavoury style of dining."

"By-the-by, you haven't told me what you intend doing with Bevanstoke?"

"Do!" his lordship repeated. "Close it, of course. The servants were all newly engaged by Reeves for my unfortunate brother, so I have no qualms in discharging them. They were all Londoners, as it happened. I have been recommended to a very trustworthy couple who go down to-morrow to take up their quarters."

He did not tell him how he had hoped Lady Vernon would have taken up her residence there; but, as if Mansell divined his thought, he remarked,—

"I wonder you have not suggested that

poor Algy's widow should live there till you take a mistress there yourself."

He winced at this home thrust, yet he felt it impossible to reveal the truth to him, and merely said, somewhat evasively,—

"The future is a mystery I do not care to speculate upon. I may never live to know one."

"That shot didn't tell," thought Mansell. "He evidently intends to keep me in the dark about this piece of treachery; but it is diamond cut diamond, and so he will find, to his cost."

Many important plans were made to expedite their journey over the wine.

"Suppose you come and have a cutlet with me to-morrow," suggested Mansell, "and then we can conclude our arrangements quietly. To-night I have an appointment at my club, so must beg you to excuse me."

Of course he assented. Weary in mind and body, glad to be alone to commune with his sad thoughts. Society of any kind jarred upon him, and he almost wished he had not consented to take his cousin as a travelling companion.

When, on the next evening, he wended his way towards the Temple, where his cousin resided, being one of those individuals who, though a barrister, had never been selected to plead or defend a case, consequently, the black gown and grey horsehair atrocity styled a wig, lay in all their virgin freshness waiting for moths of a different kind to what they were intended in the first instance.

Lord Vernon took a seat in the well-kept embankment garden and watched the crowded steamers sailing majestically along the great silent highway, the swish of the water lapping against their sides seemed to soothe him.

The sun was going down in orange and purple ripples and reflected in dazzling splendour on the dark grey river.

A troop of little ragged urchins ran past him happy as princes, munching slabs of bread and treacle.

"I have wealth and a title," he thought, bitterly, "yet I am the unhappiest wretch in existence. These street arabs scarcely know how to find sufficient food and clothing to keep warmth and life in their bodies, yet they are to be envied. Carking care never assails them. They are proof against envy, hatred and malice. Their happiness commences and finishes with a good hearty meal."

He called one of the boys to him and gave him a shilling. The ragged robin, for he appeared a veritable one in his fantastic garb of tatters, looked with puzzled delight up into his face, then down at the shining piece of silver, as if he could not credit his eyes. At last he burst forth,—

"Is I to carry anything for it guv'nor, cos Is'e fine and strong, I am."

"No, my boy, I want you to go and spend it among your companions."

"Crikey, won't I," he said, with a grin; "good luck to yer, guv'nor," and away he shuffled to join the others flourishing the shilling exultingly before their eyes.

"What would I not give to know the reckless joy he feels?" he asked himself, as he rose and walked through the small gateway into the cloistered silence of the venerable Temple itself.

The choir were practising an anthem in the grand old church. He stopped at the doorway to listen. Their fresh young tones rose on the evening quietude like silver clarions with that pure intonation devoid of all earthly passion which can only be heard in boys' voices. The organ thundered forth as the anthem died away.

It seemed impossible that a few bricks only separated this sublime place, where

the tiny trickle of the old fountain mingled with the whispering leaves of the ancient trees from the throbbing crowded Strand. He looked at his watch and hurried up a flight of steps and was in his cousin's quaint oak wainscotted rooms.

"I am rather late. I hope I have not kept you," he said; "but the fact is I have been studying nature—nature here in the heart of a great city, and I don't wonder this grand old spot has been the hot-bed for some of our finest scholars."

"It nurses up a few dunces as well; myself to wit," put in Mansell, jocularly. "But here comes the dinner," rubbing his hands together, as if he wished to impress his guest with his perfect good humour. "Try this claret, dear boy. I fancy you will like it," pushing the silver jug towards Lord Vernon, after pouring himself out a glass. It was tried and declared first rate. When the cloth was removed coffee was served. "How stimulating a cup of coffee is?" he observed, airily. "I know you like it in the French style; help yourself to brandy. I prefer milk you see," placing by his lordship's side a cut glass decanter about half full of spirit.

He watched the liquid drop into the cup with breathless interest, and his eyes blazed with a basilisk light terrible to look upon. But Lord Vernon was smoking a cigar in perfect oblivion of any danger or treachery, and sipped his coffee to the last drain.

"May I offer you another?" he asked, quietly, a sardonic inflection, though, in the tone.

"I will I think, but without the brandy; I feel rather thirsty."

"Probably the sauce was a little too highly seasoned. The chefs at these second-rate hotels are too lavish with their pepper and salt I fear."

"Not at all, everything was very good. I am sure," anxious to appear pleased at the dinner, though he had only partaken of a sparrow's mouthful of the good things placed before him.

"I feel uncommonly drowsy; it is the first time I have felt so since my illness," he added, after a pause.

"Come to the window, perhaps the air will take it off."

"Thanks, yes; I think I will," rising, and seating himself in a big easy chair.

"I'm poor company for you; pray excuse me, Ramsay, but you see I am only just off the sick list," and his head fell on the back of his chair as if it were too heavy for his shoulders, and his hands dropped by his side, nerveless, as if all vitality had left them.

"I feel quite prostrated," he murmured feebly, "I—I—cannot disguise it—it."

But, alas, the remainder of the sentence was never uttered, for the drug had done its fell work only too well.

"Went off like a baby, splendid," muttered Mansell. "What a boon that Indian wench conferred upon me when she told me how to use it. My astute cousin, you have indeed put an enemy in your mouth to steal away your brains," going to the decanter that held the brandy, and flinging the remainder out of the window among the clinging old ivy that hung in wild patches and clumps around the sills.

"By to-morrow morning you will be ready for act number two," he went on to himself, as he stood regarding his victim with hard cruel eyes, glittering with triumph at his diabolical success.

In his absorption he did not see a tall handsome young woman who had been watching him intently in the doorway till she came forward with an insolent smirk on her good-looking face.

"Confound it all, where did you spring



from?" he said, testily. "I thought Mrs. Holt had let you off for a day's holiday?"

"I changed my mind, because I thought perhaps"—this with an abashed look into his face—"that you might take me out in the evening."

"So I will if you help me with this idiot," he replied, eagerly, the thought flashing into his evil brain to use her as a tool and bind her to his interests.

"He wasn't like this when he came!" she answered, shrewdly.

"I can't be responsible for a fellow getting intoxicated. I am going to let him rest quietly to-night; if he is not better in the morning I shall get his people to remove him."

He then gave her a glass of wine and kissed her ripe, pouting lips and bade her go and dress and meet him outside the Alhambra in an hour's time.

She flew to obey him in a whirl of pleasurable excitement at the prospect of so much happiness; while he paced the room uneasily, annoyed at being caught by Kate Rawson so inopportunistly.

## CHAPTER V.

THE next morning when Lord Vernon awoke from his death-like trance his mind was numbed, his memory a blank. When he spoke it was a disconnected jargon, perfectly unintelligible and incoherent.

In the afternoon two sedate, gentlemanly men, frock-coated, bald-headed—the proverbial type of the medical fraternity, especially those connected with mental diseases—stealthy and silent footed, were ushered into Mansell's comfortable sitting-room.

"How long did you say your friend has been suffering from this malady?" asked the two in a modulated chorus.

"Nearly six weeks. It is very shocking, poor fellow, for he hasn't a friend in the world except myself!" he said, in a keen tone of deep feeling that any actor would have given a year's pay to have copied, it was so genuine.

"At all events, you make up for the lack of them, my dear sir," said the portliest of the pair, blandly.

"I try to do my duty," placing his hand on his heart hypocritically.

"And the terms?" questioned one of them. "You see, our establishment is not an ordinary one. It is conducted on the most liberal principles; and my patients, many of them, related to the highest families."

"Quite so. I should not have applied to you if it had not been what you say. An old college friend, now a doctor, recommended me to you. I am prepared to pay anything in reason."

"Well, I propose, before we conclude the business, to see our patient."

"Certainly, gentlemen. Follow me," he replied.

Lord Vernon was lying on a bed busily employed counting a pile of feathers he had mischievously pulled out of his pillow.

Both doctors unanimously agreed that the unhappy man's mind was gone.

"It seems to be one of the most difficult cases to cure," remarked the spokesman; "for it is undoubtedly melancholy madness he is suffering from."

"Yes; I know that well. What terms will you expect?"

"Would eight hundred a year be too much? You see, being a special case, he will require great care and attention," this silkily.

"I will give you eight hundred, though it is a pretty stiff figure, and some of it will have to come out of my pocket."

"You will never miss it. So charitable

an action will surely bring its own reward," spoke up the other worthy, fastening his brown kid gloves with an unctuous smile of intense satisfaction at their profitable day's work.

"Mr. David Croft is the name, please," as they looked up inquiringly as they were signing the certificate.

"Thanks, Mr. Mansell. Now we will relieve you of your poor friend," as he placed a cheque in his hand for eight hundred pounds.

"It will always be paid in advance."

They bowed, and together dressed Lord Vernon, who was perfectly passive and docile, and led him into the Strand, where a neat brougham was waiting.

"It is too painful for me to follow him. You understand my feelings, under the circumstances," Mansell said, as he shook hands with them both, his face assuming a dejected expression of pity and sorrow combined, quite touching in its pathos.

Lord Vernon walked between his captors perfectly indifferent to surrounding objects of any kind. He seemed to be in a dream, which stupefied him by its intenseness.

The drug which his cousin had given him was a most potent one, and is only known to the natives of India. It paralyses all brain-power.

Many of the dusky women who marry Englishmen, should they be called back to England in the cause of duty, rather than lose them, dose their food or drink with the deadly herb. The hideous secret was revealed by the daughter of his old nurse, who was passionately fond of him.

The diabolical plot was conceived before he paid his visit of congratulation and condolence at Lord Vernon's hotel.

Funds were low, and credit nil. He was in desperate straits. Satan whispered into his ear the way out of it all, and, like an obedient son, he obeyed.

"All accomplished in a twinkling," he said to himself, triumphantly. "Those two leeches will not find it necessary to declare their patient quite sane as long as they receive their pound of flesh. Now, I must practise till quite perfect the art of imitating my worthy cousin's rather peculiar signature. But, there, it is a labour of love, the golden key to fortune. What a blessing he had signed so many cheques in advance! Everything has worked in my favour."

Kate Rawson had been listening to all that had taken place, and resolved to make capital out of it when the time was ripe.

For upwards of two hours he sat copying with the energy of a hard-working clerk.

"By Jingo!" he cried at last, dashing his pen down, "the devil himself would not be able to see the difference! It would defy the cleverest expert to detect, test as he might, with all his experience and skill!"

The next day he presented himself at the bank, and drew out a large sum of money preparatory to going abroad.

"The new lord intends to go it a bit," thought the manager. "He has drawn pretty stiffly this week; a bit of a gay spark I expect."

Before Mansell started he wrote to Reeves as Lord Vernon, explaining to him that he should be away several months, perhaps years.

That gentleman received the missive when he arrived at his office.

"What a pity," he muttered, "to see that fine property going to rack and ruin," as he read its contents; "neither he nor his wife will, perhaps, ever enter the doors again. Well, well, it is not my business; but still it seems a great waste, and I heartily wish he had not devolved upon me the duty of informing Lady Vernon. He

has discovered it is by no means a pleasing duty."

But the lawyer was a thoroughly conscientious man, and, painful as any duty might be, he would carry it out to the letter for his clients, even at the sacrifice of his own convenience.

So the following morning he was on his way to Devon to see Lady Vernon.

It was a dark grey kind of day, with a pallid-like sky overhanging—like a slate-coloured tent—the sunless earth, such an one as chills poor mortals far worse, coming in the midst of summer, than the winter; for there is no cheerful fire to compensate you by its cheery warmth or companionship.

To his quick, decisive question as to Lady Vernon being at home he was told "yes!" and conducted into the tasty little drawing-room of the bungalow by the sprightly Deborah.

"My lady is not very well," she said, as she placed a chair for him; "but I know she will see you, sir, if you will wait a few minutes."

"I wonder what he has come about?" Lady Vernon said, trembling with apprehension when her maid entered her pretty little sanctum leading out of her bedroom. She had chosen it because of the splendid view from the windows of the sea.

"He has come to tell me he, too, is dead, poor fellow. The fetters are at last riven."

She looked very lovely in her trailing sable robes, her golden hair just crowned by the snowy widow's cap, her large pansy-like eyes sad, and sweetly appealing in their pathetic expression.

"How lovely she is!" was the unspoken thought that rushed to her visitor, who was not insensible to beauty, though he was a hard-headed solicitor, when she entered the room; "and how shall I break the astounding truth to her, for I feel sure it will be a blow?"

After exchanging the usual formula as to the day etc., there fell a dead blank pause.

"Of course, you are anxious to learn my errand?" he commenced, with a little, dry cough of sheer nervousness.

"I can guess it," she interposed softly, "poor Ronald Vernon is gone!"

"Sometimes, my lady, the medical faculty make mistakes, I won't say blunders, and err in their judgment."

"What do you mean?" she gasped, throwing her white fingers together in an agony of awful suspicion.

"Be calm, I implore you," he pleaded, shocked at the ashen pallor of her face, and deeply deploring his task now that it had to be gone through whatever the consequences. "As I just repeated, my dear lady, the doctors were wrong."

"Then all is lost!" she wailed. "Oh! merciful Heaven! spare me the horror of it!" and she bowed that regal young head in a paroxysm of bitter shame in her hands.

His tongue cleaved to his mouth. He felt powerless to utter one sentence of comfort to her stricken, wounded soul.

At last he found courage, and said,—

"Lord Vernon has left England for Africa, and I feel sure will never molest you in any way!"

"Oh! the shame of it!" she moaned, not heeding his words; "wife to my darling's brother. Why was I vile enough to consent to that horrible mockery, one that has steeped two lives in perpetual misery and degradation?"

"You look upon it in rather a severe light. Perhaps some arrangement can be made. What, of course, I cannot say."

"If my child lives it will despise me, its wretched mother," she exclaimed, hysterically, "as a creature unworthy of the sacred word of mother!"

"I have here a letter entrusted to me for

you by Lord Vernon. Some of its contents I am acquainted with, as he told me them with his own lips. It offers you half the income as long as you live, and then reverts to your child."

"Which I refuse to accept," she replied, vehemently. "No, I would starve rather than touch one penny."

"It is your right," he urged, "doubly your right."

"Spare me!" she pleaded. "The very thought of it heaps coals of fire on my head. I loathe the very thought. No, I say, solemnly, I will not accept one penny of Lord Vernon's money. The pin money my dead husband settled on me at our marriage will suffice me and my child if it lives."

He saw she was obdurate, so he refrained from further persuasion, and left the lonely young widow with a profound feeling of increased esteem, though he was mortified at her refusal to accept her rights.

"Such a high-minded noble creature deserves a better fate," he told himself, as he settled himself down in a comfortable first-class carriage and helped himself to a cigar to soothe his excitement, for he could not forget the piteous expression of desolation in her eyes when he bade her good-bye. It haunted him.

He thought of his little sixteen-year-old daughter at home. And what if she was cast upon the world in the same way, friendless, bowed down with grief, and, then to crown all, to find herself wedded to a man which she felt by the laws of nature was a sin?

Lady Vernon paced the drawing-room, when Mr. Reeves had gone, in a state of wild, overwhelming misery, repeating again and again, distractedly,—

"Oh! the shame of it! oh! the shame of it!" till at last, worn out, she sank down on a couch, cold and shivering, as if she was smitten with ague.

So Deborah found her, when, getting alarmed, she timidly knocked, and getting no answer entered, and found her lying shivering and cold as ice, with eyes wide open, but expressionless.

In a panic of alarm she ran and fetched her fellow-servant from the kitchen, and together they raised her and carried her to her bedroom, poor Deborah sobbing out,—

"It's all that old Reeves' doing. She was all right till his evil shadow crossed the threshold. If he ever steps foot inside here again I'll let him have it straight, that I will."

In less than four-and-twenty hours Lady Vernon became a mother. The crowning joy of a woman's life was hers, for it was a son, too. One last sweet link of a too brief past of wedded bliss.

But, alas! there was no rejoicing in the little household, for the young mother lay in that widowed chamber on the very brink of the shining river, while hushed whispers and silent feet stole about like spectres lest a sound should disturb the sufferer.

At last the great tension on their minds was lifted by the local doctor, who very considerably explained to the two faithful creatures that Sir James Henderson, the celebrated physician, had at last declared the gratifying intelligence that his patient would pull through.

"Oh! sir! I could go on my knees to you both!" exclaimed Deborah, wiping the swimming tears from her poor tired eyes with her stiff-starched apron, which only scratched and besmeared her face. "Poor darling lady! To see what she has gone through is enough to wring one's very heart since the poor master died."

"Dry your tears, my girl," the cheery little doctor said, "and go and ask cook to make some of her strongest chicken broth,

and set about making one of her best things in jelly; our invalid wants nourishing now."

Jane, the housemaid, had stood quietly whimpering all the time, too shy to venture a remark; but at last she found her tongue, and said,—

"Please, doctor, may I take a turn for the nurse to-night. I am sure to keep awake if you will only trust me, and the poor soul is worn out for want of sleep."

"There is no reason why you should not," he replied; "in fact, we shall be very glad of your services."

And Jane was as grateful and proud of the permission as if the good gentleman had conferred some great honour upon her.

The young widowed mother, though bereft of the precious privilege of a husband's love and sympathy, yet possessed the affection and fealty of two humble, yet faithful hearts, and under their fostering care she soon regained strength and health, and her boy, whose advent had nearly cost his mother her life, was a strong, big-limbed young rascal, dimpled and rosy as a young Cupid.

For hours Edith, Lady Vernon, would sit with the miniature of Algy, her husband, clasped in her hands, gazing first at the bundle of lace in his dainty blue silk curtained cot, then back to the pictured face, tracing with all a mother's proud rapture the baby's face in its father's.

"Darling one," she would coo, softly, "gift from the angels, sent as the dove was to Noah to bring joy and comfort in his tribulation, to you will I dedicate my life, you shall learn to be a good and a great man, and papa shall live again in his noble son."

These were the visions she delighted to conjure up through the glowing autumn days, when the flowers were faint with their own fragrance and wealth of bloom, and the sea calm as a lake and blue as the sky above.

There, by the soft babbling surf, mother and child would pass away the day under the shade of a huge white umbrella, the fresh breezes, pregnant with life-giving properties, scattering its rose petals of health and beauty on both their cheeks.

Master Algy would crow and kick out his fat wool-shod feet at the passing ships, as they glided by like big winged birds, and stuff his rosy fists into his tiny mouth, as if choking himself was a part of his insane delight.

Deborah was raised to the proud position of nurse, and tried her level best to spoil her young charge, whose creed was that he was not to be denied any mortal thing he clamoured for, not even her curly fringe which she took such pains to make trim and nice every morning under her becoming cap, and sad havoc he would make with it, clutching it and tugging it when he was not too amiable.

"I shall have to scold you, Deborah," her mistress would often say, smiling, though, all the time at her boy's antics. "You are ruining that rascal; in fact, we are all a pack of stupid, and our little tyrant king knows it," and she would laugh, and Algy's nurse would laugh in concert, and that would be the end of the scolding.

And thus two years passed away, bringing no tidings of the man who had gone to Africa to bring back his brother's remains, and Lady Vernon began to look back upon that eventful time as some vague, delusive dream, when a letter arrived which brought the terrible black past back only too vividly.

It was from a gentleman, and ran thus,—

"To Lady Edith Wynn Vernon. Madam, —It is my painful duty to apprise you of

the demise of Mr. Daniel Reeves, who was, I find, your legal adviser and solicitor. I have taken over the business, and should esteem it an honour to be retained in your esteemed service, assuring you that I shall endeavour to do the utmost to merit and obtain your good will and confidence.—I remain, madam, yours very faithfully, MATTHEW COLLET."

"I am so sorry, poor fellow, he was very kind and gentle to me," she said, when she had read the melancholy news. "Every one seems to die that I like."

Then her eyes caught sight of her bonny boy playing on the lawn with his pet, a tiny white kitten, with his fair curls glistening like spun silk in the morning sun, and his frank, fearless eyes blue as the summer seas, raised to the open French window to look at her.

"Heaven forgive me that rebellious thought," fell from her lips piously, for there stood here one earthly treasure the picture of ruddy health and merriment, whose feeble cries had reached her even at the portal of the tomb, and quickened her maternal instinct into life.

That day a letter was written and posted to Mr. Reeves' successor, accepting his services in all business affairs, in place of the deceased.

#### CHAPTER VI.

On a bed of pampas and wild grasses out in West Africa lay a man, hollow-eyed and emaciated. A rude tent had been built to keep off the torrid rain or burning sun. Mighty palms surrounded the tent, as if the spot had been carefully chosen for shade.

Great butterflies, red and gold, purple and pink—the most impossible hues the mind could imagine—spangled the wild graceful ferns that grew up to the eternal blue sky in tree-like stature, and twined their delicate fronds from palm branch to palm branch, making a fence of exquisite beauty and luxuriance.

"Oh! for release from this cursed swamp!" groaned Lord Algernon Vernon, for it was he in the flesh, stretched out on that pallet of grass; "would that I had listened to my darling Edith!"

"Did you speak?" said a soft voice, in a dialect he had learnt, and a tall reed-like dusky form glided into the tent and stood with folded hands across her breast beside him.

A yellowish, soft garment clasped around her lithe waist by a zone of coloured beads, confined it, and her jetty hair fell in a mass of rippling waves to her naked feet. Around each slender ankle were rings of beads, and gold bands, rough virgin gold, bright and unalloyed.

She looked a *houari*—a kind of beautiful dark spirit—sent to while away weak man's senses with those magical eyes that were flashing fire one moment and teeming with a sleepy languor the next—a creature to fly from or else yield thy very soul to for ever.

"No," he murmured, "I was thinking—thinking of my land and my people."

"Thy land and thy people are dead to thee. Now thou art my captive—mine, white spirit of the other world, where the sun hides its face," and she took up an improvised fan of palm leaves, and gently fanned him, chanting a weird dirge-like tone the while.

"Nalda, how long have I been here?" he asked, as her song died away in a soft wail, sad, though very sweet and soothing.

"Ten moons; twice your leg had to be set."

"I broke it again trying to leap over that swamp, eh?"



"Yes, and dark black death tried to snatch you from Nalda; but I fought it foot by foot, and now you are all mine own," a perfect gleam of passion kindling in her lustrous eyes that sent a thrill of fear through his weak frame.

For he knew he had kindled a wild, mad passion in this dusky daughter of the sun, more to be feared than even the sanguinary savages who had thirsted for his life, and from whom she had saved him from the most horrible of deaths.

"When shall I be able to walk, Nalda?" he asked, with a weary sigh.

"I cannot tell; but we will ask the medicine man; but why sigh, sweet lord, when Nalda is here to sing to you, to watch by your side?"

"Would the chief, your father, like to be chained like some beast, unable to rise lest his limbs would refuse their mission? Oh, Nalda! my heart sinks at this clod-like existence. I have been so active, the first in the chase, the last to seek repose."

"Wait yet awhile, sweet lord, and thou shalt be the fleetest of chiefs in the chase, and thy handmaid shall behold thee covered with glory—the glory of the redskin!" and as she spoke her countenance melted into softness, and she knelt by his side, and covered his white, thin hand with kisses, her magnificent hair falling about her like a glossy silk garment, and sweeping the long, wild grass.

"What can I say, what can I do?" was the tortured thought that beset him. "I dare not tell the truth, lest I raise a spirit of revenge in that untamed breast. Oh! soul of my beloved Edith, fly to me! Spiritualists affirm that distance is no obstacle when people are one in soul. Surely we are that!" and as his thoughts took flight to the fair, golden-haired love of his life, the woman who had saved him from death knelt and claimed him as her own, sealing the bond with those hot, impassioned caresses on his hand.

Days merged into months ere he was able to leave the shelter of the tent, for a lingering, low fever, the result of worry and climate, held him in its grim clutches.

When he stood once more on the mighty earth, image of the Great Master who had fashioned him, his soul poured forth praises and thanksgivings to the jasper gates beyond those sapphire skies.

"I am a man once more!" he breathed; "and a woman beautiful as the woman of old has been the instrument; yet I have not one spark of love to return in payment!"

Nalda's father, a splendid specimen of his race, accorded every consideration to his daughter's chosen lord, for such he was considered.

All the tribe paid their abject allegiance to him, even to the children, and brought the spoils of the forest and laid them at his feet, their ebony, almond-shaped eyes twinkling with pride when he smiled and thanked them in their strange language.

If grand sport and wild scenery could have made him happy he ought to have been the king of gaiety, for every day he cared to join the chief, a panorama of varied scenery met his eyes that he, traveller though he had been, had never in his wildest flights of fancy conceived.

When they returned on an evening there was feasting and merriment among the tribe, for many denizens of the lonely forest lay about, while a deliciously appetising odour arose from the dainties cooking.

Immense outlets from a great fat eland would be broiling, perhaps on wood ashes, while caldrons full of every kind of wild fowl would be simmering away blithely.

The sun had turned him a russet brown,

hands and all, and Nalda looked with pleasure at his bronzed face.

One evening she ventured to put the question which had been hovering on her lips for weeks, but a something restrained her—a shy kind of modesty which many of her pale sisters of the north might not be ashamed to possess.

"Sweet lord," she said, softly, veiling her eyes from him timidly, "why hast thou not asked my father to give me to you according to our laws?"

The question came upon him like a thunder-clap, and sent him in a fever of keen perplexity.

"Why do you not answer?" she urged, impetuously beating her breast with her hands, a little piqued by his tardy return to her seductive blandishments.

"Nalda, your laws and mine are opposed," he said, evasively. "Yours would not bind me, because I am a Christian."

"Make me a Christian too!" she said, simply; "my people need never know."

"You know not what you ask, Nalda," he sighed; "cannot you guess that an Englishman would tire of this land, where the foot of the white man never treads; that if he wedded you one day his yearning for escape would perhaps be gratified by some happy chance, and he would leave you for ever, a perjured traitor to your lavish affection?"

"I would kill him first," she hissed, recoiling from him as if he were about to strike her. "A dark skin knows how to avenge her honour."

"Better to be in the toils of a tiger than this hour!" he thought dejectedly; "one I might escape from with a little subtle cunning, but her, never."

Suddenly she observed his despairing expression, and the fierce light faded from her eyes; she was tamed by the fear that in her wild impulsiveness she had offended him.

"My beloved, forgive thy Nalda! She knows not what she says in the tempest of her great love, which is as strong as yonder rocks!" pointing to a pile of jagged granite that rose like a cairn along the line of the horizon in the far distance.

"This is getting insupportable," he thought. "I am only human. I am strong now; but how long shall I be able to hold out with this temptress assailing me at every turn from my allegiance to my sweet wife? If ever I needed your prayers, Edith, it is now."

Then he thought over the futile attempts he had essayed to escape, and how impossible it was ever to succeed alone and unaided, for he was out of the track of ships; leagues of sandy prairies and desert-like plains had to be crossed before the sea could be reached.

"I am doomed," he mused in reckless misery, "there is no escape."

"Why are you silent? Have I wounded thy heart? Speak to thy handmaid, even if it be to chide!"

"What if I were to confess all, and throw myself on her mercy! Anything would be better than this fencing with truth and honour," passed through his mind.

"Nalda, you ask me why I do not answer you," he commenced, boldly, resolved to put his fate to the test, come what might. "It is because I grieve to pain you who have saved my life from those monsters, and then nursed me back to health. Ill should I requite such devotion if I deceived you. Nalda, my heart is not mine to give! It is aching and throbbing with wild longing for my wife, the woman I love. If it were possible to reverse what is, I would accept the gift of your love, and return it, ay, tenfold."

The girl sat on in stony silence as if the power of speech had deserted her; then

her lips parted, showing her glittering teeth that seemed to clench with pent-up rage.

"And for this I saved thee," she said, her bosom heaving with the storm that raged in her heart. "Why did I not let thee share the same fate as the white-faced dog, who put a bullet through his brain to escape the torture he knew awaited him?"

"I ask no mercy, I expect none," he said, brokenly; "but, at least, you cannot say I am a coward, for well I know the penalty of my avowal. But, oh, Nalda! you are a woman and a loving one, with a heart of gold, when swayed by its own gentle impulses! Think of the aching heart of the woman who mourns alone in bitter anguish a lost husband! Have some compassion on her if not on me! Remember this, that there is one bond between you which makes you sisters in soul—your love for me!"

His words seemed to touch the best chord in part of that grand nature which lay deep below the surface, only waiting the sublime moment to burst forth like a pearl from the dull, grey shell that conceals it from sight.

"Would you tell her I gave you back to her arms?" she asked, tremulously. "If I set you free, would you ask her to call me sister?"

"I would ask her to love the very sound of your name, to remember it in her prayers," he replied earnestly, tears gathering in his eyes, wrung from him by sincere sorrow at the cruel stab he had been forced by honour to deal this loving woman.

"And will you think of the lonely one whose heart thou hast slain?" she pursued, with a dry sob, piteous in its bitterness.

"Heaven forgive me, I shall never forget you!" he exclaimed.

"Seal your words with a kiss; it will be the first that man ever pressed on my lips, and the last till death releases my spirit from its bondage."

He folded her in his arms and pressed his cold lips to hers, not in passion's fervid heat, but such as a man gives to his well-loved sister on parting, perhaps for ever, when their paths lie in opposite directions.

"To-night three trusty men of my tribe shall guide you to the sea, where you will find means of escaping from dangers that I could not save you from if once my father knew the truth."

"And you will do this?" he said, beside himself with joy.

"Yes, go, and peace go with thee," and before he could realise the astounding truth that at last he was freed from his thralldom she had silently gone, like some sad spirit, leaving him hope and a wild tumult of sweet soul-inspiring anticipation that intoxicated him by its suddenness.

## CHAPTER VII.

BEVANSTOKE was under the hands of gardeners and painters once more, for the master was expected back from his long sojourn abroad, after having made a fruitless search for the body of his brother, as he averred to his new solicitor, the successor to Mr. Reeves.

A staff of servants were installed at the hall, busily employed stripping the costly furniture from their linen shrouds, and unpacking the plush and brocaded silk curtains from their presses to hang at the doors and windows, while the conservatories were being stocked with a valuable collection of orchids.

All was animated bustle and hurry.

A pretentious, showy-looking young person, a Miss Rawson, was the head of the household and certainly used a firm hand over her troop of domestics.

"Miss Rawson is a regular nigger-driver!" declared the women, "a stuck-up marm who thinks everybody is dirt under her feet!"

The men voted her a fine-looking, sharp-tongued vixen, which evoked a volley of derisive sneers from their fair colleagues, who refused to accord her one scrap of praise—women-like.

"I wonder who that lovely girl is in that picture," the butler said, admiringly, impelled by the magnetic luring beauty of Lady Edith Vernon's portrait to stop from his work to look at it. "Do you know?"

"Me, certainly not, neither do I want to know!" she snorted spitefully, jealous that she should presume to stand star-gazing at a picture when she was in the way.

"She's more like an angel than anything I've ever clapped my eyes upon," he pursued, unbecoming her sour rebuke.

"Pictures always are like that, or they wouldn't be pictures," she put in; "they never paint them true to nature."

"That accounts for that painted photograph of yours looking so stunning that one would scarcely know it was you," he said, dryly, his small eyes twinkling with mischief.

"You are very complimentary. I must say," she returned, tartly, bouncing off in a huff.

"Tit for tat," he chuckled. "She shouldn't ride the high horse, as if she were mistress over the establishment, and bully and badger my little Bessie because we take a little stroll in the park of an evening."

It was not a very united household that its new master found when he arrived in great state to take up his residence in; though, of course, on the surface everything was glassy and smooth to the eye.

A train of followers accompanied him, regular parasites, who fawned on him in hopes of sapping the moisture from the stem and leaving it withered and dry; but they reckoned without their host, for Ramsay Mansell, alias Lord Roland Vernon, was not the easy, soft dupe they fondly believed. In fact, they were more likely to be the victims than their smooth, oily-tongued host.

The stables were filled with the finest horses money could purchase. Profuse lavishness abounded everywhere. It was evident the master of Bevanstoke meant to do things on a liberal scale.

Miss Rawson received her master in a rich violet silk dress and heavy gold chain, her face wreathed in smiles. She was one of his own importations, hence the reason of her airs and graces.

He shook hands with her in a kind, friendly fashion, and praised her handiwork unstintingly, and his friends chaffed and twitted him at dinner, when the attendants had left, upon his being a lucky dog to be blessed with such a well-favoured housekeeper, all of which sallies he took in excellent good humour.

"I say, Vernon, who the deuce is that divine creature depicted there?" drawled a young viscount, indicating Lady Edith's bridal picture.

"My wife!" he answered, coolly.

"What!" exclaimed the astonished young fellow, forgetting his affectation in sheer surprise. "I never knew you were married."

"No. Well, you see, dear boy, I am inclined to be rather reticent in my private affairs," he returned, pointedly.

"No offence, really: only, upon honour, Vernon, you ought to be the proudest man in Europe to own such a peerless creature for your wife."

"I don't mind admitting, since it will robably be the talk of London soon," he

said, with an affable assumption of candour.

"That though that lady is my wife, we are really strangers. I married my brother's widow when I was under the belief I was dying. Since that time I have never seen or even communicated with her, except once before I started for the Continent."

"Upon my soul, you must be a queer fellow to forego your claim upon such a queen of beauty, brother's widow or not."

"I have only been waiting till the tears were well dried from her pretty eyes," he replied, calmly. "In a very short time I hope to introduce you to the original."

The other men had been listening to the conversation, thoroughly taken aback, as they afterwards confessed, by this romantic story of their genial host, whom they believed was a confirmed bachelor, who liked his freedom in preference to the shackles of matrimony.

"Everything is ripe, the nest is ready and waiting for the bird," Lord Vernon, as we must style him, muttered that night, as he was ruminating over his last quiet cigar before turning into the tempting down bed that awaited him. "It's a daring scheme, but fancy the prize—a lovely wife and the next heir to the property, my stepson. It would be simple madness to be weak-hearted. In for a penny in for a pound."

When a week had passed the visitors began to disperse, for the season was at its height in London, balls, routs, and parties all in full swing. But Lord Vernon refused all the luring baits thrown out by many of his friends to spend a few days in the giddy world of New Babylon. He had resolved to pay a visit to Lady Edith Vernon and claim his rights as a husband.

"I am off to Devonshire, my dear Rawson, and I hope to bring back with me my wife."

"Your wife?" the housekeeper repeated mechanically, as if she were dazed.

"Why not?" he laughed. "Surely you never imagined I was going to settle down here in single blessedness."

"Why did you not inform me of this before?" she said, with bitter emphasis. "I thought it was to be—"

"What?" he demanded, sternly, his eyebrows knitting into a nasty scowl. "Surely you never were presumptuous enough to fancy you would be asked to occupy the position of my wife, eh?"

"Certainly not," she faltered, humbled into submissiveness by his mocking, cruel expression. "I meant simply that a housekeeper to a single gent is different to being the same to a married one."

"My wife will never interfere with you, rest assured. You have a good berth and good pay. You cannot say I haven't stuck to my word."

"Or I mine!" she interposed, nervously. "Goodness knows I had a hard time of it when that Mr. Reeves came questioning me like some Old Bailey barrister."

"He was a meddling old fool; but there's one comfort, he can never worry you again, for he is feeding the worms now, and the poor lunatic is dead too."

"Are you sure?" she asked, swiftly, her usual brazen manner returning once more.

"Why do you ask?" he said, testily. "What would it matter to you if he were alive? Would it put in your way one shilling? See here, my good soul! all you have to do is to stick to me. You will have no cause to regret it."

"But, begging your pardon, you say your wife, as if you were already married?" she said, in evident perplexity.

"I have been married more than two years," he replied, enjoying her amazement,

"only my wife and I, for private reasons, have lived apart. Her portrait is in the drawing-room."

"What, that young thing in white satin?"

"The same. I haven't such bad taste, eh, Rawson!" an exultant gleam in his false face of gratified vanity. "She is very pretty, you cannot deny."

A malignant frown gathered in her rather heavy forehead as she said, tardily,—

"What's one man's meat is another man's poison, my lord," sailing out of the room with her head tossed in the air, in anything but a good humour; in fact, steeped to the lips in malicious jealousy at the thought of a fair young mistress ruling where she had fondly believed she would reign supreme.

"Poor Rawson!" he said, cynically. "I fancy I have taken the wind out of her sails; but there, it serves her right for her airs and graces. She is too high and mighty for a poor drudge of a shavey, which she really was till I took her up."

With a jaunty air of perfect confidence he set forth the following morning on his journey to Devon. Impeccably dressed, and certainly looking a very patrician, elegant, suave, bland, and gracious—who seemed born to command by that quiet dignity he knew so well how to assume.

Lady Vernon was standing at her pretty trellised porch, watching the gambols of her boy, when the stately, graceful figure of Lord Vernon entered the gate.

"Who can it be?" she thought, for a strange gentleman was a marvel in this sylvan bower of ferns and flowers; and little Algy ceased from his play to stare with large wondrous eyes at the smiling intruder, who saw a vision of fair womanly loveliness, with an aureole of shimmering gold, framing her bewitching face and clustering all around her roses, honeysuckle, and jasmine in a tangled mass of fragrant splendour.

A shuddering quiver of vague fear ran through her breast like a sharp knife of icy steel, as the dark tanned face of the strange gentleman became visible.

The wild, terrible thought leaped to her excited brain that at last the man she dreaded, and had in her simple solitude endeavoured to forget—stifle like some horrid nightmare from her mind, had turned up at last, not to be buried in the cells of a dead past, as she had so madly thought in her delusive security.

"Lady Vernon, my eyes do not deceive me," her visitor commenced, raising his hat and standing before her positively abashed by her sweet, calm, stately beauty. "Of course, you recognise me, notwithstanding the change that sickness made in the dear old time when you entrusted your future to my care."

"Lord Vernon!" she said, trying to keep the secret torture she was bearing from his observation.

"I knew you would recognise me," he interposed, triumphantly. "If you only knew how your dear image has followed me from place to place till life became a wretched penance, you would at least greet me with a welcome."

"In Heaven's holy name forbear!" she said, brokenly. "It is sacrilege to address your dead brother's widow in such terms."

"Pardon me, I acknowledge no such tie now; the time for tears has expired, now smiles should take their place, for the poor wanderer has returned to chase them away by his faithful, never dying love."

"Love!" she repeated. "Do not profane the sacred term; you told me your heart was given, past recall, to another."

We are now giving one long Complete Story and



His face paled somewhat at his false move in this game of life's chess; but he regained his nerve in a moment.

"I was delirious, totally off the balance in mind and strength, and simply asserted a sick person's right to babble over the creations of a blurred brain full of silly fancies and illusions.

"It was no phantasy of a sick man's brain," she returned, gravely, "whatever it may be now. What you said then you meant, for the angel death was floating about your pillow, and truth was in your words that were wrung from a sore heart. Oh! Lord Vernon, you cannot deceive me."

"Will you not extend the privilege of resting beneath your roof?"

"As my husband's much-loved brother, yes," she rejoined, pointedly, about to lead the way to the drawing-room.

"No go away, mamsie," cried Master Algy, who had sidled up to them, and had been listening to the strange conversation, "come and see me fly my kite."

"May I help you, little man?" he interposed, coaxingly, thinking willy that his game would be to make friends with her idol.

"Mamsie help Algy," he answered, boldly, skipping to his mother's side for shelter, as if he distrusted their visitor.

"But permit me just this once, my dear little man," trying to take him up in his arms, and getting a volley of wrathful kicks for his pains that quite cooled his ardour and unsettled his shirt front and carefully arranged silver grey tie.

"You can't, you can't; only my mamsie," screamed the child, red with passion.

"Your son is, rather spoilt, I see; it is time a father's influence was brought to bear on his wilfulness," he said, gravely.

"My papa's up dere," pointing to the sky, Algy retorted, his limpid eyes solemn and softened.

"That is one papa, my boy, but I am your living one; won't you love me?" patting the curly little head affectionately.

"No," he spoke out, boldly. "I doesn't like you, and I doesn't play for you at bed time; on'y for my papa up dere in de sky, and my mamsie."

Having delivered himself of this clincher to all argument, Algy buried his golden pate in his mother's black skirt, but, nevertheless, glaring now and then defiantly up into the blase face of the visitor.

"You must excuse my boy, he is a spoilt darling, Lord Vernon," she remarked, a little shocked at her rebel son, "and is unused to strangers," passing over his significant words of father with cool indifference, as if she had not heard them, though they made her inwardly shiver with a horrible dread she dared not shape into words.

Very gently she bade Algy go and play, ringing the bell for Deborah to attend him, and then led her unwelcome guest into her delicious, flower-scented drawing-room.

How peaceful and restful appeared to the jaded, blasé man of the world this shady retreat by the sea, the soft harmony of colour and exquisite taste displayed in every minute detail revealing the refined nature and soul of the presiding priestess, whose fragile, statuesque beauty appealed to his taste, usually gross and sensuous, in a way he had never experienced before in the presence of woman, giving him a glimpse of a divine, subtle influence woven by the mesmeric spell of a pure, unsullied nature, in which sordid feelings held no sway.

"She must acknowledge me, and I will redeem the past, and live a better and godlier life," he thought, hurriedly, as he glanced furtively at her tranquil, pure profile in rapt interest that he could not resist.

The oppressive silence which had fallen upon them Lady Vernon broke, observing—

"You have told me no news of my lost husband, if you succeeded in tracing where he lay in that land of savages."

"It is a subject painful alike to both," he returned, gravely; "yet I can say so much—that I searched long and unceasingly, never giving up hope till I found it was useless and utterly futile," and he raised his snowy hemstitched kerchief to his eyes hysterically, as he was overcome with sorrowful regret.

Those large, liquid eyes sought the floor to hide the tears that would flow, despite her brave struggle to be firm and cold in her outward manner before him.

But those tears, tribute of an undying love to a dead husband, nettled him so that he felt a pang of mortal jealousy against his dead cousin.

"Heaven will bless and reward you for your brotherly love!" she said, earnestly, when she felt able to speak without trembling.

That gentle remark, so sublime in its tender, sisterly tone, fretted him. Those clear, starry eyes were calm and serene as they encountered his ardent, concentrated gaze without one spark of nervous self-consciousness.

Had she evinced the slightest tremor or agitation, or the fleetest or swiftest blush stolen into her cheeks, he would have felt more at ease, more certain of his prey.

That his daring enterprise of personating the man who had sacrificed his own happiness to serve a dead brother had succeeded so well was naturally a trump card, yet he was far from happy.

"It is my boy's dinner hour, and I always join him, so I must ask you to excuse me," rising and offering him her hand.

"I am staying for a short time at the 'Royal,' and will, with your permission, call to-morrow. My visit to Devonshire, as you doubtless guess, is of vital importance to both yourself and I," this as he bowed himself out of her presence, leaving her in a fever of dreadful anxiety.

How changed and different he is to the man I believed dying. He spoke of his devotion to some loved one, and now he seems to forget nearly his own words, and looks at me in a way that thrills me with horror," she murmured, as she made her way to the nursery.

Not even her darling boy could chase away the cloud of brooding care that gathered on his mother's usually placid brow, though he used all his funny little arts to make her smile and attract her attention to himself.

A cloud had gathered over the calm, peaceful little home that threatened to devastate it and hurl her from her beloved paradise, as Hagar was driven forth with her son Ishmael.

#### CHAPTER VIII.

HER heart throbbed madly, despite the strong curb she tried to put on herself when Lord Vernon was shown in the next day, soon after noon.

There was a resolute fixed expression in his eyes, foreign to their nature, that she positively recoiled before; her quick, sensitive nature divined she was in peril, that he, like Shylock, had determined to claim his bond.

After frigid commonplace words had been exchanged there fell an ominous silence, painful as it was awkward; at last his lordship rose and approached her, and took a seat by her side.

A spasm of mortal fear quivered through her every fibre, and she shrank further on the couch away from him in mute apprehension.

"Edith," he commenced, reproachfully, "why do you repel me thus? The laws of Heaven and man condemn such conduct from a wife."

"Oh, why persecute me with such a mockery? You know that ceremony was not binding! It could not be; besides, you with your own lips, when you felt the breath of death upon you, declared life would be unendurable without the woman you loved."

"Simple nonsense, the rambling of delirium! Every man has his little romances, as children do their ailments. I am no exception to the rule; but my real romance, the one great resolution in a man's life has come at last, and I am madly, hopelessly in love with my own sweet wife!"

"It is sacrilege," she cried, putting forth her hands as if to shield her from some deadly danger. "Do you know what you are saying, Lord Vernon?"

"Why do you act the prude, Edith? This is not the time for such absurd displays. Remember the sacred contract that binds us. One that no man can put asunder until death, and think of your boy, my poor brother's son, and mine now doubly by the tie of blood, and the sanction of our church."

"I repudiate it, I deny any such bond. It was more form to secure the property to my boy," she retorted desperately, driven to bay by his specious arguments. "When you sent me that letter by Mr. Reeves offering me half your income I refused, and released you from every responsibility for ever. Now you come to poison my ears with your unholy words of love, that cause my very soul to revolt with their black sin."

"Edith, I have listened to this ridiculous tirade long enough," he said, impatiently, "but there is a limit to my endurance. As the head of my house I shall insist upon my rights, despite all your Quixotic notions. Your son is my ward, and I am your husband. I love you, and will make your life the happiest and brightest woman ever experienced. Bevanstoke is swept and garnished, and only waits the homecoming of its peerless mistress. Your picture has been my shrine ever since my return to the old roof tree that has cradled the Vernons. Its deserted rooms cry out for the laughing prattle of my boy, the home of his ancestors holds out a loving, cordial welcome. Can you be hard and cruel enough to turn a deaf ear to my pleading, sanctified as it is by the claim of kindred and blood? Oh, Edith, my sweet bride! take pity on me, for indeed pure love dictates every syllable that falls from my lips."

Never had this false, black-hearted man ever been so near the confines of sincerity as now. The goal of his ambition was reached, but all the fruit he had plunged his soul in peril to attain at that supreme moment he could have yielded up cheerfully to win a glance of love from her starry eyes! She was the ideal his heart had created, the one woman to recall him from the rapid descent of a ruined, poisoned existence that he knew awaited him, the fate of the *roué* and profligate.

But no marble statue could have been less moved or colder, and her stony impassiveness stung him with bitter resentment.

"Do not drive me too far," he said, hoarsely, "lest the love I now feel for you turns to hate."

The satanic expression of concentrated rage that blazed in his crafty eyes made her tremble and quail before him; hitherto harshness had been a sealed book to her, tenderness and love had been lavished freely, unstintingly by every one who came under her gentle sway.

He noted with regretful remorse the piteous dismay in her sweet face, though he blamed her for her obstinacy in holding out so firmly against him.

"I have been unkind, rude," he broke forth, suddenly. "Edith! have pity on me yourself, cast this veil of ice from you; it is not your own heart that speaks, it is only a barrier erected by your pure nature, because you have formed some mistaken idea."

"Nothing you can say could ever alter the feeling I hold on the subject; it is as fixed as death. I never could change, because my soul recoils with loathing from such an union; do not, I implore you, urge me further, it is useless."

Overwhelmed by her firm refusal to yield, he said, with a bitter ring of poignant anger in his voice,—

"Then I shall apply to the law to compel what my prayers have failed to accomplish!"

"For my child's sake," she cried, "do not drag my name before the world, it would kill me!"

"For your child's sake accede to my just demands, or rather entreaties," he retorted; "the option lies with you."

"I cannot, oh! I dare not. I should feel I had sullied my fair fame; have mercy on me, as you will expect mercy on that great day before the throne of Heaven itself."

"Adieu, Lady Vernon, specious pleading will not dupe me; my claim shall be made before an earthly judge first."

With these bitter words he departed, letting himself out at the hall door, which he slammed violently in his mad, baffled rage.

## CHAPTER IX.

In less than a fortnight Lady Vernon was served with a citation for restitution of conjugal rights which he had never held; but it was the only way the law permitted him to use, and he was obdurate, determined to bend her to his will, even if she hated him for ever afterwards.

He plunged into excitement to stifle thought; balls, dinners, picnics, little suppers, piquant and dainty, with the fairest nymphs of the ballet and burlesque, each and all he tried, yet they palled upon his jaded tastes, and the memory of a fair, proud face, pure as the first burst of morning sun, haunted him even when smiles were cast from bright flashing eyes by seductive sirens, who craved to win his heart and wear his title.

"Who do you think Frank is going to bring this afternoon, Adah?"

"How do I know Aunt," returned Miss Vange, listlessly, her pretty eyes abstractedly turned towards the large bow windows crowded with flowers, and overlooking the park, where a crowd of carriages and riders were trying to make headway to show off their best points.

"You are quite provoking, you seem to evince no pleasure in anything."

"Because everything is so tame, so humdrum. Look at those men and women opposite, what are they but puppets, who seem to think it the acme of all that is delightful to prance and curvet before the le fortunate ones, who stand staring with wide open eyes and mouths that water with envy?" and she gave a little mocking laugh.

"My dear Adah, you are a regular misanthrope. You quite shock me; but reverting to my question, I will tell you who is coming. It is Lord Roland Vernon; he has lately returned from abroad, and everyone is asking him to their houses, so I persuaded Frank to entice him here to drink tea with us this afternoon."

The lady rattled on while she adjusted a dainty satin bow to her shoe, which had become entangled in the lace of her tea-gown, so did not see the start or sudden deadly paleness which sprang to the girl's face.

"Lord Roland Vernon!" she gasped, "coming here to-day?"

"Yes; and hark! this may be them now," as a great peal of a bell, followed by a thundering knock at the hall door resounded through the mansion.

Miss Vange shrank behind the curtains just as Lord Vernon advanced into the room, accompanied by a young fellow with amber hair and a huge moustache twirled and waxed to perfection.

"Now, this is indeed good of you," Lady Canton said, graciously extending her hand to her distinguished visitor; "but here is my niece, who, you doubtless know, without my aid," pointing to where Adah sat in a stupid, puzzled bewilderment.

"I beg your pardon, but there is some mistake," she remarked to the equally astonished Vernon; "you are not Roland Vernon."

"Indeed, I am sorry to contradict a lady," he said, boldly, unflinchingly; "but I am that individual."

"Not of Bevanstoke?" she persisted.

"Yes, of Bevanstoke."

But at last he lost his *savoir faire* entirely, for he felt a crisis which he never dreamt of had arrived, and his identity was about to be challenged and refuted by this lovely little Hebe before him.

"Lord Roland Vernon I knew as well as my own self; therefore I must decline to acknowledge you as my old friend," she replied, gravely; "you are, I presume masquerading for some purpose best known to yourself. If it is a jest it is a very cruel one."

If a mine had exploded at his feet he could not have been in a more pitiable plight; all his bravado deserted him, even speech was frozen on those false lips.

"I think there is some trifling error somewhere," he at last stammered, his face ghastly white, his voice tremulous, while beads of perspiration started to his temples.

"One that must be explained," she returned, pointedly, rising and taking a seat by the pretty basket table where tea was being served.

"What is to be done?" he thought, distractedly, "the whole affair has burst like a soap bubble around my doomed head. I thought as Roland was a perfect stranger to England and unknown at Bevanstoke I was safe."

He accepted a cup of tea, and tried to make a show of drinking it, though it nearly choked him, and then made a hurried excuse, and took his departure in a frame of mind bordering upon madness, for the trial was to take place in a few days between Lady Vernon and himself.

Desperate, in a very slough of reckless despair, he entered a public-house, a thing he had never done in his life before, and called for brandy, and drank off a shilling's worth at a draught to brace up his nerves.

"There is but one escape out of this," he told himself, "to force Edith to fly with me abroad. She will, perhaps, yield now rather than suffer the ordeal she believes awaiting her. She shall submit. I will not let her slip through my fingers again. No living soul can thrust me forth from her home. Consequently, there will I remain, holding to my right as her protector and husband."

While he was plotting his last act of villainy a very different complexion was being put on affairs at the bungalow in Devon.

Lady Vernon, harassed to death at her ap-

proaching trial, which she had determined to face, in spite of the shame and bitter humiliation, was seated with her child at her knee, teaching him his first prayer.

"Dad bless mamsie and papa up in sky!" he lisped, earnestly, after his pensive, sad young mother. He couldn't say "up in Heaven," so in his innocent way, altered it to sky; "and fardive naughty people and fardive 'ittle Algy—" but ere the last words fell from those pure baby lips his tiny dimpled hands fell from their reverent position, and he piped out in a clear treble of positive alarm,—

"Man! man! 'ook, mamsie, man!" pointing at the French window, where stood a dark-faced man tanned to the hue of a native Indian, but framed with fair hair which gave him a peculiar appearance.

Lady Vernon looked, and leaped forward like one distraught, and gave a piercing scream, and was then clasped in the arms of Lord Algy Vernon.

"My own, my wife, my precious darling!" he murmured. "It is not a visitant from the other world, but your husband who holds you to his heart. Speak to me, look up into my face. Joy never kills. Only be brave."

At this moment, young Algy, crazed with jealous fury and indignation, set to punishing him with his baby fists about his legs.

"Leave do my mamsie, wicked man! I'll tick you!" and this torrent of wrathful abuse from her boy touched the maternal chord in her nature, and her senses which had for a brief moment forsaken her, returned, and she gasped, beseechingly,—

"Take your son, hold us both to your heart, my darling husband. Hold us tight, for indeed my soul has hungered for a little love."

Young Algy was caught up and smothered with kisses and tears together till his rosy face was wet and he panted for breath, while his fresh cambrio pinafore and bright blue sash were crumpled out of all their pristine beauty.

That day was a day of fervent thankful rejoicing. And, hand looked in hand, Lord Vernon told the story of that noble girl's love and sacrifice; and then he looked into his sweet wife's face, and whispered, while hot blushes stole on her cheeks,—

"Edith, Algy's sister shall be called Nalda, what do you say?" and her answer was to nestle her dainty head on his breast, and stammer, coyly,—

"Your will is mine, darling, Algy!" It is the sweetest name I ever heard."

The next morning husband and wife were strolling like a pair of turtle doves in the shadiest part of the pretty garden in the rear of the house where the strawberries and raspberries were hanging in tempting crimson bunches, and Lady Vernon would persist in regaling him with them, while he feasted his eyes with a lover's rapture on the slight white-clad form, so sylph-like in its graceful symmetry as she stooped to pick the luscious fruit.

The moss roses that lay in the folds of soft lace at her white throat were rivalled by the colour on her cheeks, and never, even on her bridal morn, had she looked so fair and sweet; so thought Lord Vernon.

"There is the visitors' bell," she said, as she popped in his mouth a large, ripe strawberry. "Who can it be so early? This is our day, Algy. I do hope they will say I am not at home."

"You must send word, dearest, that you are engaged. I cannot have our sweet repose disturbed for anyone."

"If you please, my lady," panted out a flushed maid, who had evidently been assisting the cook in preparing the luncheon, which the mistress had ordered to be on



rather an extensive scale in honour of their master's return, "Lord Vernon wishes to see you."

"My brother!" ejaculated his lordship. "Come wifey, we will go and make him welcome. How he will rejoice at seeing me again in the flesh."

Though she had related to him all about the coming trial and the avowal of love professed by his brother he bore him no ill will, for he said it only showed the good taste of Roland in falling in love with so fair a rose.

Hand in hand they entered the drawing-room, and Lady Vernon went forward with outstretched hands, her face all gracious smiles, saying half shyly,—

"Roland! See, brother, the dead has come to life. Here is Algy."

"Stop! What is the meaning of this, Ramsey Mansell?" thundered Lord Vernon, rushing forward to take his wife's trembling form in his. "Where is my brother?"

"Is this not Roland, then?" she asked in terrified accents, clinging to him for support.

"No. This is my cousin; a man whose honour consisted in name only; whose life no pure woman's ears should be poisoned by knowing!"

"It is useless for me to deny anything! I played for a big stake, and have lost!" said Mansell, huskily.

"Villain! where is my brother?" demanded the outraged lord, menacingly, his eyes lurid, his hands clenched as if about to spring upon this serpent and grapple with him to the death.

"Where you will go if you give way to such fits of frenzy. Will you, now that everything is in your favour, let bygones be bygones if I restore him to you and the world? Let me remind you that the honour of the family is at stake if you are harsh in your dealings with me."

"In Heaven's name, man, say what you have to say, and go! I have no wish to see you a convict, bad as you are."

"I am poor, in fact, penniless."

"Even that can be remedied, if you speak the truth," said Lord Vernon, sternly.

Penicilling down the address of the private asylum on a card, Mansell handed it to him, saying,—

"Now I will go, trusting to your promise to give me the means of quitting England for ever. My address, for some days, will be at my chambers in the Temple."

But fate, which Mansell had long defied, was on his track, like an avenging Nemesis.

It was dark when he reached his rooms, half intoxicated, his head throbbing, his temples almost bursting for the want of sleep.

"I must rest, or I shall go mad!" he muttered, hoarsely. "Laudanum will be my best friend. When I awake I shall be ready to start a new campaign abroad."

He groped for the bottle, and poured out, with shaking hand, a large dose of the narcotic, adding to it some brandy.

Next morning he was found dead on the couch, and thus paid the penalty of a mis-spent life, and passed away from the theatre of his misdeeds.

A few words only need be added to this eventful story.

Lord Vernon's brother was restored to liberty in the full possession of his reason, in fact, he had been only detained as a lunatic for the sake of the large sum paid for his detention.

He married Ada Vange, his first and only love, and in her affection and tender protection buried the black past.

When Kate Rawson heard of the sudden

end of her friend Mansell she escaped to America, to begin afresh a career of duplicity.

Not a shadow crossed the lives of Lord Vernon and his lovely wife.

Nalda is well remembered in the person of a little girl who bears that name, to them a household treasure; for if it had not been for Nalda's loyalty and love "Edith's Dilemma" must have ended in utter defeat and despair.

[THE END.]

### THE OLD-FASHIONED GIRL.

She's only an "old-fashioned girl," she says,

(Is it enough to disgrace?)

An "old-fashioned girl"—with womanly ways,

And a winsome and womanly face;

A girl who is innocent, modest and sweet,

Who is sensible, honest and true—

The kind that will surely be obsolete

In another short year or two.

She isn't ambitious for questionable fame,

She doesn't ape man in her dress,

She doesn't read books that have a bad name,

Nor herald her "views" in the press;

She doesn't use slang nor smoke cigarettes,

Nor loudly expound "Woman's Rights,"

She shuns all the fads of the "fashionable sets,"

And "home" is her chief of delights.

She's only an "old-fashioned girl," you see,

And not in the least "up-to-date,"

But she is the kind of a girl for me,

And the kind that I want for a mate.

I know it's very "old-fashioned" to say

Your wife is a "saint from above"—

But I own I am fond of her "old-fashioned" way,

And proud of her "old-fashioned" love.

### A Charming Love Story.

Our Novelette for next week is a particularly charming love story, entitled

## *Elinor's Golden .. Dream, ..*

By the Author of

"Twice Chosen," &c., &c.,

It is a vigorous and captivating narrative, crowded with brisk and exciting action, and founded on a mystery which is carefully preserved to the very end. The incidents are, many of them, thrilling to the highest degree.

### Facetiæ.

WELL FIXED.—Upton: "De Carb's failure is a pretty bad one, isn't it?" Downtown: "No—o, not so bad. He's got his new spring suit."

HAD HAD EXPERIENCE.—Mr. Green: "Will you believe me when I tell you that I was never before engaged to any girl?" Miss Summermaid: "Oh, I knew that the first time you kissed me."

A FAIR REASONER.—Discouraged Suitor: "Do you ever reason?" Miss Flightie: "Reason? I should say I did. I took up a paper only yesterday, and reasoned out all the points in the joke column."

THE GENUINE ARTICLE.—Lady: "Are you sure this is genuine English breakfast tea?" Talented clerk: "Well, madam, I had some of that tea at supper last evening, and I dreamed all night that I was falling off of London Bridge."

A GENTLEMAN.—Mrs. Upton: "I saw Mr. Newton bowing with the most courtly grace to a very common-place woman. He's a gentleman of the old school, isn't he?" Mr. Upton: "No, a gentleman of the new school." Mrs. Upton: "New school?" Mr. Upton: "Yes. He lives in the suburbs, and that was his cook."

NOT ATTRACTIVE.—Mrs. De Good: "Why aren't you going to church?" Mr. De Good: "Last Sunday the roof leaked, and three or four drops went down my back." Mrs. De Good: "The roof has been repaired since then." Mr. De Good: "Huh! Then they'll be wanting money to pay for the repairs."

INFORMATION FOR THE HOME.—Mrs. Binks: "In one part of this paper it says that fresh bread can be cut easily and evenly by heating the knife before using it." Mr. Binks: "Yes." Mrs. Binks: "And in another column it says that heating a knife will ruin it." Mr. Binks: "Yes." Mrs. Binks: "How do you explain that?" Mr. Binks: "The paper has two editors."

TWENTIETH CENTURY RELIGION.—Deacon De Goode: "Why don't you go to church, neighbour?" Neighbour: "No time. Churches are too slow for this age. They don't fit into our twentieth century mile-a-minute civilization; no-sir." Deacon De Goode: "Um—well, what would you suggest instead?" Neighbour: "Can't say exactly, but it ought to be some sort of a put-a-penny-in-the-slot-and-save-your-soul machine."

A TRAMP RECITE.—Housekeeper: "You promised that if I'd give you a good meal and a suit of old clothes you'd tell me how to keep the premises free from tramps." Tramp: "Yes, mum, an' I'm a man o' me word, mum, an' I'll keep me promise, although that meal wasn't no great shakes, an' this suit ain't much of a fit. But I'll tell ye." "Well, what course am I to pursue?" "Never give 'em anything, mum. Good-day, mum."

WOMEN LIKE PRAISE.—Jack: "I'll tell you what's the matter, George. You don't praise your wife enough. Even if things don't go right, there's no use growling. Praise her efforts to please, whether they are successful or not. Women like praise, and lots of it." George: "All right. I'll remember it." George (at dinner, same day): "My dear, this pie is just lovely! It's delicious! Ever so much better than those my mother used to make. She couldn't equal this pie if she tried a month." George's Wife: "Huh! You've made fun of every pie I ever made, and now—"

George: "But this is lovely." George's Wife: "That came from the baker's."

for the story takes an unexpected and thrilling turn.

# A GOLDEN DESTINY.

By the author of "Redeemed by Fate." "The Mistress of Lynwood," &c.

## CHAPTER I.

**N**O. — Grosvenor-square, was the town residence of the Earl of Dunmore; and on the evening of which we write—an evening in June, when the season was at its height, and carriages were rolling along the streets, bearing their occupants to balls, theatres, and parties—Lord Dunmore and his son were sitting together over their wine, engaged in conversation rather more serious than generally occupied their after-dinner attention.

The room was large and lofty, the ceiling painted in frescoes, and the walls were panelled in costly wood. Heavy velvet hangings screened the windows, and a few magnificent bronzes and world-famed pictures gave evidence of their owner's taste and love of art.

The Earl was a man of about fifty or thereabouts, tall, dark, and still handsome; while his son, younger by some five-and-twenty years, strongly resembled him, save that he was considerably fairer; and instead of having black hair and a grizzly beard, thick chestnut curls were tossed back from his forehead, and the heavy moustache shading his lips was even fairer, gleaming in the light like ruddy gold.

Harold, Lord St. Croix, was considered one of the handsomest men in London; and it was only owing to his essentially manly nature that he had not been spoiled by admiration, and the consciousness that Fortune had lavished upon him her choicest favours.

"Yes," he was saying, as he carefully peeled a peach with the silver dessert knife; "I quite agree with you that I ought to marry, and the sooner the better, I suppose. Not that I, personally, have any desire for putting my head in the matrimonial noose," he added, with a light laugh; "but when one has the title and estates to think of, one must put aside purely personal considerations."

"Certainly!" acquiesced his father. "I am glad you are so ready to meet my wishes, and not only in the matter of marrying, but in that of choosing the lady as well. Sir Trarice Leigh has been my friend from boyhood, and it has always been our mutual desire that our two families should be united by the closest of possible ties. If he had a daughter I should wish you to marry her, but, failing that, the next best thing is to marry his niece."

"Miss Seymour is very pretty," observed Lord St. Croix, in a meditative voice, cutting the peel of the peach in tiniest fragments; "or, perhaps it would be better to say she is very handsome, for 'pretty' hardly describes her accurately."

"She is not only handsome, but she will inherit the whole of her uncle's estates, which are very large; and, as you know, dovetail into ours," said the Earl. "Besides, she is eminently calculated by nature to shine in society—and that is really what you want in a wife, if you contemplate a political career."

There was a short pause. The ticking of the clock on the black marble mantelpiece alone broke the silence within the room; but outside could be heard the subdued hum of the great city, and the sound of carriages drawing up in front of different doors in the square.

Presently Lord St. Croix said, with a short laugh,—

"Has it not struck you as strange, sir, that in all this talk about my marriage, there has been no mention made of what is usually supposed to play a primary part in such affairs—I mean love?"

"I supposed you were 'in love,' as it is called, with Ermentrude Seymour," responded his father, rather stiffly. "I do not see any reason why you should not be."

"No—unless it is true that reason and love have very little to do with each other."

"You paid her a good deal of attention last year, and gave her cause to suppose that you cared for her."

"Did I?" returned the young man, carelessly. "I suppose I did. Well, she was the belle of the season, and I really did like her and admire her very much. I daresay, in time, I shall become desperately in love with her, or if I'm not it won't matter, for liking is almost as good a foundation for matrimony as love. At any rate, I am quite willing to marry her, if it will give you so much pleasure," he added, stretching out his hand, which his father heartily grasped; and having thus arrived at a satisfactory termination to their *à-tête*, they both got up—the Earl to adjourn to the library, while Lord St. Croix, slipping a light overcoat over his evening dress, lighted a cigar and went out.

He had promised to attend a reception given by one of the minister's wives; but, somehow, he felt in no humour for company just then, and so he sauntered along the gaslit streets, finally turning on to the Embankment, where it was quieter, and better adapted for meditation.

Before he had proceeded far a girl's voice, slightly raised, broke on his ear, and he involuntarily stopped, struck by the exquisite sweetness of the tones. The speaker was standing a few paces off, and seemed to be trying to draw herself away from a man who had laid his hand on her arm, apparently for the purpose of detaining her.

"I tell you I do not know you, sir!" she exclaimed, and there was the faintest possible trace of a foreign accent in her voice. "I beg you will release me instantly!"

The man's reply was inaudible, but it evidently roused his companion's anger, for she strove with all her might to disengage herself from him, at the same time calling out,—

"Help! Help!"

Lord St. Croix had never been in a street row in his life, but he was not the sort of man to disregard a woman's cry for aid; and almost before the appeal had died on the young girl's lips, he was by her side.

He could see her companion now, a dark, rather handsome man, who looked as if he had drunk more than was good for him, and who, in spite of her cries, still kept hold of the girl's arm.

"Loose that lady immediately!" said Harold, imperatively. "If you do not I shall—"

"What?" insolently asked the other, without obeying the mandate. "You will mind your own business. I should think, if you know what wisdom is."

"You are right, and my business will be to knock you down," the young man responded, promptly. "I give you one more chance, but if you don't take your hand away at once I shall put my threat in execution."

A muttered curse was the only reply, and the next minute the ruffian was sent spinning across the pavement, while the young Viscount, turning to the girl, said rapidly,—

"You had better get away from here—there will be a crowd directly, and it will be pleasant for neither of us. Come!"

She followed him obediently, and it was not until they had proceeded some distance that he stopped.

"I think you will be all right now," he said, kindly. "At all events, you may feel assured that cowardly bully will not annoy you again."

For the first time he looked at her, and saw her face, and as he did so, he could not repress a slight exclamation of astonishment, for assuredly his eyes had never before rested on anything so lovely.

She was very young—a mere child, in fact—being hardly more than eighteen, and in her large blue eyes was an expression of most childish innocence.

She was dressed very plainly in black, and from under her little hood a cloud of yellow hair had escaped, and lay on her shoulders like a golden aureole.

There was something peculiar in her dress too. Lord St. Croix could not have said what it was as he had been asked, but it gave her a half foreign air, which was increased by her accent when she spoke.

"You have been very kind to me, sir," she said rather tremulously, "and I thank you with all my heart."

Then she took his hand, and with the perfect natural innocence of a child, raised it to her lips, at the same time lifting her grateful blue eyes to his.

Lord St. Croix felt deeply embarrassed, but at the same time deeply interested. Who was this beautiful girl, with her refined and gentle voice? What brought her wandering about the London streets at this hour?

"I had lost my way and was looking at the river when that man spoke to me," she went on, after a moment's pause. "Can you tell me the route to Charing Cross?"

He directed her, but still she hesitated, and he fancied it was because she was afraid of being annoyed on the way. With this idea he said,—

"Should you like me to see you home? I could at least protect you from interference."

"Oh, no, no!" hurriedly. Then she added with a melancholy smile, "I am not going home yet. But I am in trouble, and your face looks so kind that I feel I can tell you of it, and perhaps you may be able to help me. I am going a journey, and I find I have not enough money to pay for my railway fare."

She blushed all over her fair face as she made the confession, and Lord St. Croix, putting his hand into his pocket drew forth five or six sovereigns and some loose silver.

She made a quick gesture of negation, and drew her slim form up with a movement of hauteur that would have become a duchess.

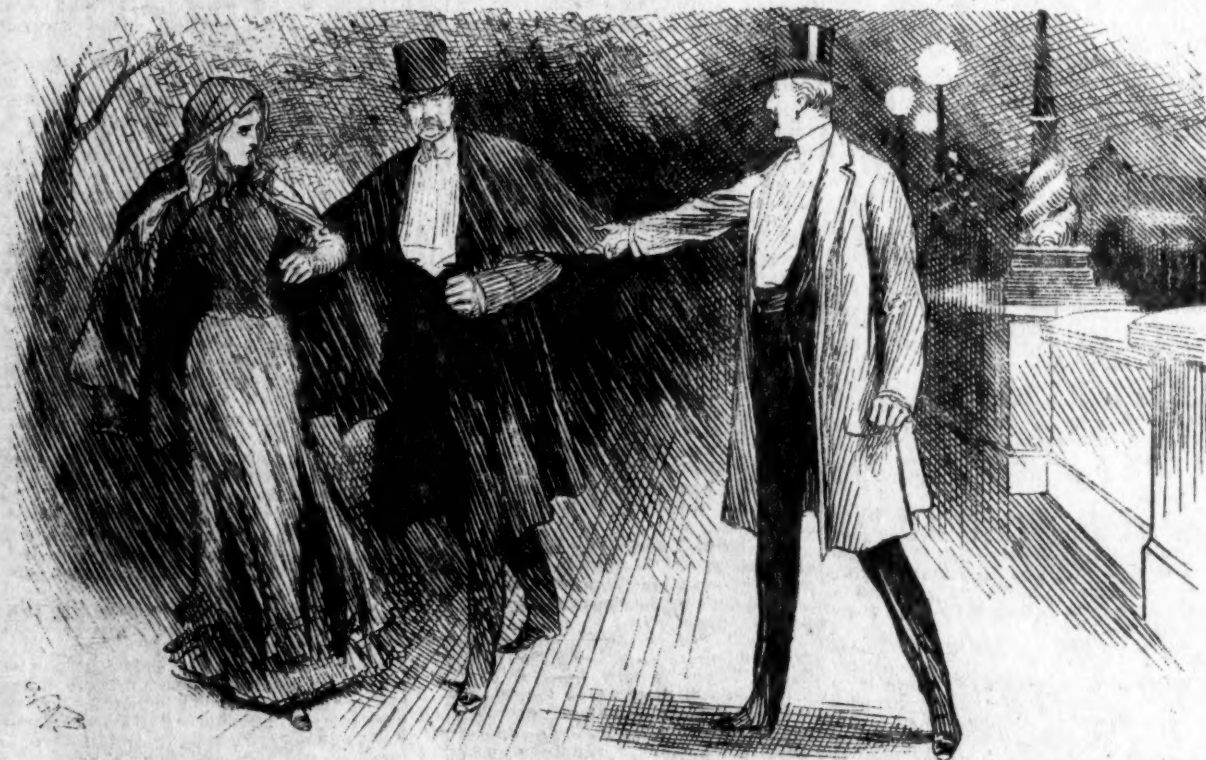
"I do not want to borrow or beg," she said, her voice instinct with pride. "I have an ornament here that I believe is worth a good deal of money, and I intend selling it. Perhaps you can tell me of a shop where they buy such things."

She drew a little case from her bosom, and opened it. It contained a gold pendant in the form of a Maltese cross, and it was set with jewels which glittered in the light of the lamp.

Probably it may have been worth from five to six pounds, but a jeweller would not have advanced half the sum upon it.

She, ignorant of the value of such things, had no doubt over-estimated it worth.





"YOU ARE RIGHT, AND MY BUSINESS WILL BE TO KNOCK YOU DOWN," LORD ST. CROIX RESPONDED PROMPTLY.

"How much money do you want?" asked the young Viscount.

"Four pounds will be enough, I think."

"Let me give you five, and then you can redeem your locket when you like."

"Do you mean," she exclaimed joyously, "that if I send to you and return the money you lend me, I can have the pendant back?"

"Certainly!"

"Oh! thank you—thank you! But you must tell me your name and where you live."

It was his turn to hesitate now. For all his chivalrous and romantic tendencies, Lord St. Croix was still a man of the world, and the idea of giving his address to a perfect stranger whom he had met in such a casual manner did not particularly commend itself to him. Was what she said true, or was she an imposter, trading on his credulity?

One glance into her eyes—clear, fearless mirrors of a pure soul—set all his doubts at rest, even made him ashamed of them, and without more ado he took out a card and gave it to her.

She read it with unfeigned curiosity, and then looked at him with a new interest.

"Harold St. Croix! What a pretty name."

It should be mentioned that the card he had selected had his name, but not his title printed on it.

"I shall not forget it, or your kindness, and some day, perhaps—"

She broke off abruptly, as if hardly certain of the termination she had intended giving her sentence, and after wrapping the sovereigns he had given her in a piece of paper put them carefully away in her pocket. Then she held out her hand,

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye," he said, holding the little slender fingers in his own. "Are you sure you would not like me to see you safely to your destination?"

"Sure—quite sure, thank you all the same. I shall write to you sometimes, and send you your money. In the meanwhile, take care of my locket."

A moment later and her form had disappeared beyond the radius of light cast by the lamp, and Lord St. Croix stood alone, wondering at the adventure which had just befallen him.

He had had more experience of life than most men of his age, but never before had such an one happened to him, and perhaps the spice of romance surrounding it made him attach to it a greater importance than he would otherwise have done. That the girl was a lady he had no shadow of doubt, and once he thought he had been wrong in not insisting on seeing her safely back with her friends. Still he could hardly have forced his escort upon her, for there had been a certain dignity in her refusal, against which it was hard to rebel.

Whoever she was she was a mystery, and more than that, a mystery Harold would have liked to see solved.

He went towards the parapet, and gazed at the darkly flowing river, with the lamps on either side throwing their long wavy, reflections on its blackness; and as he gazed there rose, before him that sweet girlish face, with the blue eyes looking wistfully into his, and that scattered cloud of golden hair lying over the slim shoulders.

He turned round with a slight movement of impatience.

"Pshaw!" he exclaimed with a laugh, "I am almost as bad as the romantic boy

of seventeen. I don't suppose I shall ever see the girl again, and even if I do, what will it avail? In future I belong to Ermentrude, and it won't do for my thoughts to run after strange goddesses."

But he did not go to the reception which he had promised to attend; neither did he, as usual, drop into his club. Instead of this, he went home, and stayed by himself in his own "den," smoking until the small hours of the morning.

## CHAPTER II.

WOODLEIGH COURT, the residence of Sir Travice Leigh, was a grand old pile of grey stone buildings, partly covered with ivy, and partly stained with the lovely mellow hues of moss and lichen. It had been built in the reign of Elizabeth, and had been much added to and improved since then; and although the outside bore upon it the marks of having withstood the storms of many winters, and the suns of many summers, the interior was replete with every comfort that modern ideas had invented, and that money was able to procure.

Sir Travice Leigh was a rich man, and never having squandered his fortune in gambling or on the turf, could afford to indulge his most extravagant caprices.

The rooms of his niece and heiress, Ermentrude Seymour, were especially sumptuous, as he had furnished them on purpose for her. There was a suite, consisting of bed, dressing-room, bath-room, and boudoir, and all were panelled in white wood, beautifully carved, while the curtains and upholstery were of the most delicate blue and silver brocade.

The boudoir looked a nest fit for any

to its splendid Serial Romances and Long Complete Stories.

princess in the land, with its swinging silver lamp, its choice water colours, its brackets and statuettes, and the hundred and one pretty nick-nacks with which girls love to surround themselves.

Ermentrude herself was one of the choicest ornaments of the house. Look at her as she leans back on the softly luxurious couch, clad in a crimson plush tea-gown, with cascades of costly lace about it, and a knot of yellow roses fastened at the throat! Look at the dark, full eyes, above which delicate black brows arch themselves; at a full, pouting, scarlet mouth, and the ripples of blue-black hair waving away from the low forehead, and confess that she might sit to a painter as a model for Cleopatra, or some Moorish princess equally beautiful!

But Moorish princesses are as liable to the annoyances and vexations of common humanity as other people, and at this particular moment Ermentrude looks anything but amiable. Her brows are knitted together in a frown, and her small foot, in its crimson silk stocking and silver-backed shoe, taps on the floor in very decided impatience.

"It's all very fine to talk of his being rich and titled, but, after all, there's a good deal to be said in favour of having a husband in love with you, and that Lord St. Croix certainly is not," she said to her mother—a stately looking dark woman sitting opposite.

Mrs. Seymour's lip curled with some scorn.

"My dear child, you are too romantic by far," she returned, placidly, going on with her crewel embroidery as she spoke. "When you have lived as long as I have you'll find love is a very small item in life."

"Perhaps; but how about the years that intervene before I am your age?"

"Lord St. Croix is everything that could be wished as a parti," went on Mrs. Seymour, choosing to ignore the last question; "and, besides, he is the man your uncle wishes you to marry, so there is no more to be said on the subject."

"Then I suppose that you think girls ought to marry to please their relatives, not themselves?"

"Certainly, in some cases—your own, for example. Listen to me, Ermentrude," Mrs. Seymour went on, impressively, laying down her work, and looking her daughter straight in the face. "You are getting a little too independent and self-willed, and therefore it is my duty to recall you to a sense of what your position really is. You have been brought up as your uncle's heiress, your caprices gratified, your wishes consulted in every possible way; but, remember, you have no real claim on Sir Traviçe Leigh, and if he were to die to-morrow without a will the law would give you simply nothing at all."

"I am his niece," said the girl, sullenly.

"You are his niece, the daughter of his half-brother. It is true he intends making you his heiress, and you are fated for a golden destiny, if only you play your cards properly; but he is a man who will not bear contradiction, and he has set his heart on your marrying the son of his old friend. If you thwart him it will be the worse for you."

Ermentrude was silent, for she saw quite clearly the force of her mother's reasoning, and acknowledged its wisdom. The fact was, that she had grown so accustomed to looking upon herself as Sir Traviçe Leigh's heiress that she seldom paused to consider whether the claim she had upon him was a legal one, or one that he could repudiate at any moment if he were so disposed. It was not pleasant to be reminded of the dis-

agreeable fact that her future wealth depended entirely upon his caprice.

"Has my uncle made a will?" she asked, presently.

"No; I am sorry to say he has not."

"Why doesn't he do it, then?"

"Why do so many men die intestate?" retorted her mother. "Simply because they have an intense repugnance to looking forward to their own death. Sir Traviçe, though a strong-minded man in other respects, is foolish in this one."

"Have you ever tried to persuade him, mother?"

"Dozens of times, and he has promised to do it, but has put it off and put it off until the present moment. I dare not say too much, especially as the last time I mentioned the subject he said he should make your future all right in your marriage settlements."

"Does he mean he will settle all his fortune upon me?"

"I expect so—at his death, that is to say. Why!" Mrs. Seymour continued, "you are certainly one of the most lucky girls in the whole world! Young, handsome, rich in prospects, and about to be married to a—"

"Viscount!" put in her daughter, with a slight sneer. "After all, it is not so very much, when I might have aspired to a duke if I had not been hampered with my uncle's wishes."

"Don't be a fool!" retorted Mrs. Seymour, sharply. "I suppose you have heard of people who have dropped the substance while looking at the shadow. I hope you don't intend to emulate their achievements. Lord St. Croix will be here this evening, and you had better make up your mind to receive him with your very sweetest smile."

"And in my very prettiest dress! You may be sure I shall follow your counsel in both instances; for I have not the faintest intention of letting him slip through my fingers—something to fall back upon in case my uncle does not make a will."

Mrs. Seymour smiled grimly.

"There's many a true word spoken in jest."

"By the way, what time is Lord St. Croix coming?"

"He will be here about half-past eight, I expect. Dinner has been put off until nine in honour of his arrival."

At this moment there came a hasty knock at the door, which was immediately after opened to admit a short, stout woman, of middle age, dressed in the garb of a sort of upper servant.

"Can I speak with you a minute, ma'am?" she said, addressing Mrs. Seymour.

"Certainly;" then in a tone of alarm, as she saw the woman's anxious expression, "what is the matter, Sumner? Has anything happened?"

"Yes—something very unfortunate—about as bad as it can be," the maid answered, shortly. She looked at Ermentrude, who was gazing at her with undisguised curiosity; and then, crossing over to her mistress, whispered something in her ear which caused Mrs. Seymour's face to turn deathly pale.

She half rose from her seat, and threw out her hands with a gesture that looked like appeal.

"It is not true—it cannot be true, Sumner!"

"It is quite true, ma'am, and the sooner you gather your wits together, and think over what had best be done, the better," grimly replied Sumner.

"What is the matter, mother?" asked Ermentrude, looking from one to the other suspiciously.

"Nothing—nothing that can be told to you," was the short reply, and, while speaking, Mrs. Seymour left the room, followed by her maid.

Ermentrude knitted her brows together in a puzzled manner after they had left, wondering what had happened to disturb her mother thus; but although she was curious, she was far too selfish to waste her time in thinking over matters that did not actually concern her, and a few minutes later she had gone to her dressing-room, and was turning over the contents of her wardrobe to see what dress she should select to wear for dinner that day—a most important consideration—seeing that she was always desirous of looking her best, and divided her time pretty equally between trying on garments and g-ing out.

It had been a bitter disappointment to her that Sir Traviçe Leigh had resolved not to go to London for the season, alleging as an excuse his own health, although Ermentrude more than suspected that this was not the true reason, but that he wanted to keep her in the country, so as to make sure she should marry no one save the husband he had already destined for her.

Half-an-hour afterwards the young heiress heard the sound of carriage wheels, and, looking out, was just in time to see her mother step into the brougham, followed by Sumner.

"I wonder where they are going," thought the girl, watching the carriage from behind her curtains as it drove away. "It is very strange mother should go out to-day when the whole house is more or less topsy-turvy on account of Lord St. Croix's arrival, and, stranger still, that she should take Sumner with her! I believe there is some secret between them; which no one else shares, for the woman behaves more like an equal than a servant and mother nearly always gives way to her."

With this conclusion she turned to her dresses again.

### CHAPTER III.

THE day after Lord St. Croix's mysterious adventure he started for W-shire, in which county Sir Traviçe Leigh's estates were situated. The journey by rail was not of more than four hours' duration; but as Woodleigh Court was some distance from a station, there was some four or five miles to travel after he left the train.

A carriage was at the station to meet him, and a dog-cart for his luggage. He got into the former, lit a cigar, and as he was borne along through the June afternoon, wondered what had become of the girl whose little locket was placed carefully away in his pocket, and whether he should ever see her again.

Out of the clouds of cigar smoke floated that fair face, with its wistful blue eyes and scarlet mouth—its tender troubled expression.

With an effort Harold brought back his thoughts to the present, and looked around him. On either side were broad stretches of pasture land. In the distance farmsteads were dotted about here and there, and yet farther away the blue hills rose and kissed the clouds.

All these fair lands belonged to Sir Traviçe Leigh, and would at his death pass to his niece, Ermentrude.

By and by the carriage passed from the open ground along a road, on either side of which were dense plantations, where game was carefully preserved—for the baronet was a keen and eager sportsman, and yearly assembled a large party at the Court for the first of September.

"What glorious preserves!" muttered Lord St. Croix, as he leaned out of the open carriage, the better to look at the wood.



It was now about eight o'clock and just growing dusk. In the west the sun had set, and long lines of gold and burning crimson told where he had gone down.

Over all a great stillness reigned, broken only by the low trill of a thrush, now and again, or the shrill, startled cry of some other bird flying low across the path.

Suddenly, and with preternaturally startling effect, another sound broke on the silence—the sharp, cracking report of firearms, and a bullet whizzed close against Harold's cheek, lodging itself in the lining of the carriage.

Instantly the coachman pulled up his frightened horses, which had been alarmed at the report, and were now kicking and struggling frantically.

It took him some time to quiet them, and, meanwhile, Lord St. Croix sprang to the ground, and looked round to see if there were any signs of his assailant—for that the bullet had been intended for him he had not the slightest doubt.

"Stay," he said to the coachman, whose name was Jarvis, and who was an old family servant of Sir Travice's. "I will go in the wood, and see if I can find the man who fired the pistol."

"Do you think it was done on purpose, my lord?" asked Jarvis, who was much paler and more frightened than Harold himself.

"Certainly; and the marksman was a very good one, too. If it had not happened that I swerved round to the right just at that minute, I should have been a dead man by this, for the bullet would inevitably have passed through my brain."

"Perhaps it was poachers?" suggested Jarvis.

"Poachers don't carry on their depredations thus early in the evening; and, besides, as there was no danger of my interrupting them, they assuredly would not have thought it worth their while to risk detection by firing off their weapons. No, we must look for the would-be assassin in another direction."

He got into the wood by leaping over the low fence that divided it from the road, and which, while it afforded an excellent place for concealment, would still allow any person crouched in its shadow a full view of the road, for there were many gaps, and also many places where the undergrowth was scanty.

In one spot the turf was trampled down rather more than in other places, and here Lord St. Croix decided his assailant must have knelt.

Whether this was so or not cannot be said, but in any case the man had got clean away, and without leaving any signs by which a clue to his whereabouts might be gathered. Harold, convinced of the uselessness of any further search, left the wood, and returning to the carriage, carefully extracted the bullet which had lodged itself in the wadding, and which he put away in his pocket-book.

Then, directing the alarmed coachman to drive on, he composed himself in his old corner, and kept a sharp look-out during the entire route, so as to guard against any second attempt that might be made.

His precautions were unnecessary, however, for the rest of the drive was accomplished without interruption, and on arriving at the Court, Lord St. Croix found his host standing on the steps ready to receive him.

The baronet was a man of about fifty, but looking older than that by reason of his white hair, which lent him an appearance almost venerable.

He had been handsome, but sorrow, even more than time, had left its marks on his face, without, however, quenching, in the

least degree, the firmly determined expression, which was, perhaps, the most striking characteristic of his face.

He greeted Lord St. Croix with more than ordinary welcome, and it was clear that he entertained a great affection for the son of his old friend.

"You are rather later than we expected," he observed, leading the way into a lofty gothic-roofed hall, on the walls of which were arranged stags' and foxs' heads, both English and foreign, while the marble floor was partially covered with the skins of various animals shot by the baronet.

"Yes, a slight accident detained me," Harold returned, with careless indifference.

"An accident?"

"Nothing much. I will tell you about it after dinner. By-the-way, I fear I have kept you waiting."

"We put off our dinner-hour until nine o'clock in expectation of your coming," evasively answered the baronet. "However, I will not keep you here any longer, you must be quite starved."

"Not so bad as that," laughed the young man, as he ascended the broad, shallow oak stairs, "but all the same, dinner will be very welcome."

He was not long dressing, and when he entered the drawing-room, found it already tenanted by the baronet, his niece and her mother, and a second gentleman, who was introduced as—

"Mr. Villari."

As he heard his name, Harold recollected that he had been staying at Woodleigh Court for the last six months in the capacity of secretary to Sir Travice, who thought very highly of his talents. He was a particularly good-looking young man, with dreamy Italian eyes, and the face of an artist or a poet. As a matter of fact, he was half Italian, having been born of an English mother and a Roman father.

Ermentrude looked radiantly handsome. She wore a dress of pale lemon silk, half smothered in rich lace; emeralds gleamed on her white neck and rounded arms, and a jewelled bird, whose plumage quivered with her every movement, sending out flashes of green and red light, nestled in her hair.

She was taken down to dinner by Lord St. Croix, who told himself that he was surely a man to be envied in having the prospect of so beautiful a bride.

A coquette to her finger-tips, Ermentrude made every effort to fascinate the young Viscount, and kept up an animated conversation with him during the whole of dinner—casting every now and then glances on the secretary, who, to do him justice, paid very little attention to her.

"I did so wish to be in London this season," she said, sighing, as she adjusted the bracelet on her round, white wrist. "It seems such a pity to stagnate here in the country, while all the gaiety of the season is in progress."

"And yet the country, at this season of the year, is far lovelier than town."

"Perhaps so, but I don't care a bit for scenery, and I like crowds of people."

"Do you mean to say, that, brought up in the country as you have been, you care nothing for flowers, and lovely landscapes, and all the other beauties of sylvan life?"

"It is true," she avowed candidly. "I prefer seeing the flowers blossoming in pots in a crowded ball-room, and I like the sound of the Blue Hungarian band ever so much better than the songs of thrushes and blackbirds. Do you call it bad taste on my part?"

"It is a peculiar taste," he answered evasively.

She laughed as she lifted her champagne glass to her lips, and sipped the amber liquid with the zest of a connoisseur in wines.

"I am not romantic," she observed, lightly, "and, what is more, I don't pretend to be. I tell you right out that I should be miserable if I thought I should be condemned to spend next year at Woodleigh Court."

"There is little danger of that," he returned, in a significant tone, as his eyes met hers.

She knew his meaning, but instead of embarrassing it seemed to please her, and her brilliant eyes flashed triumphantly as she rose, and followed her mother out of the room.

Mrs. Seymour had been very quiet during dinner, and as she was usually a fluent talker, her silence seemed all the more strange.

Once or twice she had endeavoured to rouse herself from her abstraction, but it was quite clear the effort was distasteful to her, and that she was decidedly not in the mood for company.

When the gentlemen were alone, the conversation reverted to Lord St. Croix's accident, which he proceeded minutely to describe.

Sir Travice and Villari both expressed surprise, and seemed inclined to believe that the shot had been the result of an accident, but this view was distinctly negatived by the Viscount.

"Just before the shot was fired I saw a hand above the leaves," he said, "and although, if nothing had happened I might have taken no notice of the circumstance, I now feel quite convinced that that hand held the pistol which was fired with the intention of taking my life!"

"Are you sure it was a pistol, and not a gun?" asked Villari.

"Quite sure!"

"What has given you that idea?"

St. Croix smiled, and took from his pocket-book the bullet, which he handed to the questioner.

"There is not much doubt on the point with that for a guide," he observed.

"No," returned the secretary, looking grave. Then he added, after a moment's pause, "Have you any enemies who are likely to have followed you down here?"

"Not that I am aware of; indeed, to the best of my belief, I have not an enemy in the world."

Sir Travice was much disturbed about the incident, which by some process of reasoning impossible to follow, he was inclined to blame himself for.

"I ought to have sent a close carriage to the station to meet you, and then you would have been all right," he said.

"My dear Sir Travice, pray don't concern yourself over the matter; it has neither alarmed nor disturbed me in the very least!" exclaimed the Viscount, with a light laugh. "The only thing about the whole affair that worries me is the mystery in which it is enwrapped, and that, I candidly confess, I should like to fathom. I would give a hundred pounds at this moment to lay my hand on the man who fired in ambush!"

"Cowardly villain!" said the secretary, warmly, "hanging would be too good for him. Shall you take any steps towards finding out who he is?"

"I shall," put in the Baronet, with decision. "It has occurred on my estate, and I shall think it my duty to sift the matter to the bottom. To-morrow I will write to Scotland-yard for a detective to come down, and if the wretch is anywhere near Woodleigh Court I should think we

shall be able to unearth him. At any rate, it shall not be for want of trying."

After this the three gentlemen returned to the drawing-room, where Ermentrude was seated in front of the grand piano, accompanying herself while she sang.

Lord St. Croix went over to her, and under cover of the music an incipient flirtation ensued, which consisted of compliments on his part, and a few of her most telling coquetries on hers. The Viscount knew quite well she was a coquette, and he more than suspected she was vain. It amused him to whisper flowery speeches into her willing ear, and he murmured flatteries so far-fetched that after uttering them he more than once feared she must resent being told so plainly of her charms. His fears were groundless. No fish ever rose to a bait more greedily than Ermentrude to compliments. If she could have had her will, she would have lived in an atmosphere of constant adulation, and—more than that—would never have grown tired of it!

When coffee was brought in, Lord St. Croix moved away to the side of Mrs. Seymour, and then the conversation became general.

"It is quite a long time since you were here before," remarked Mrs. Seymour, half reproachfully, to the young Viscount. "Nearly two years!"

"Is it so long? How quickly time passes! You see I have been abroad since then, and the rest of my time has been taken up in one way or the other. Do you remember the picnic we had during my last visit to Heron's Nest?"

What was there in the question to make Mrs. Seymour grow pale, and to cause the hand which held her coffee cup to tremble so greatly that a few drops of its contents were spilled on the carpet?

"Did we have a picnic at Heron's Nest?" she faltered.

"Yes. Have you forgotten?"

"I had forgotten, but I think I remember it now."

"I suppose the old place is still standing, and is still in the same half ruinous condition?"

"Nothing has been done to it in the way of repairs," she answered.

"A good thing too, so long as you do not require it for habitation. Its picturesqueness would be spoilt if you were to have the windows restored, and the walls made weatherproof. It is certainly, as it stands at present, one of the most eerie looking places I ever saw. One might well imagine it haunted by all the ghosts of the dead and gone Leighs."

"One might do something more than imagine," returned Mrs. Seymour, in a mysterious undertone.

St. Croix looked at her inquiringly.

"Do you mean that you really believe it to be haunted?" he said, incredulously, while a half smile played round his lips.

"I do. I am not jesting, Lord St. Croix, for I have both seen and heard things at Heron's Nest which will admit of no other interpretation than that they are supernatural."

"What class of things?" he asked, not without a suspicion of mockery in his voice.

"I do not wish to talk more on the subject; it is one which always make me feel half-frightened. You may laugh as you like, Lord St. Croix, but I am perfectly serious in what I say."

"I will be as solemn as a judge," declared the young man, composing his features into an expression of ultra-gravity. "If you will only give me a description of the—what shall we call them—appearances?"

Mrs. Seymour hesitated, then said, in a low voice,—

"There is a legend connected with Heron's Nest, and I believe the story is a true one. One of the Leigh's fell in love with and married a young girl very much below him in social position. The marriage was kept a secret from his family, and in order that it should not be suspected, he brought his bride down to Heron's Nest, which belonged to him; for as you know, it has, from time immemorial been the custom in the family for the eldest son to take possession of it on his twenty-first birthday. There the young wife lived for two or three years, and at the end of that time her husband, who had ruined himself in gambling, and leading a life of general dissipation, decided to repair his damaged fortune by marrying an heiress, whose family, ignorant of the fact that he already had a wife, had proposed the alliance to him. He, therefore, came down to Heron's Nest one dark night in December, and went to his wife's sitting room, which was situated in the Tower overlooking the mere. There he found her, and it is said proposed to her she should leave the country, on condition that he gave her a large sum of money. She naturally refused, and seems to have upbraided him very bitterly for his neglect, and cruel treatment, whereupon he, maddened by her reproaches, all of which he richly deserved, took her in his arms, and flung her through the open window into the mere below."

"What a blood-curdling history!" exclaimed St. Croix, with mock horror. "And, pray, what became of the wicked husband afterwards?"

"He married the heiress, but was constantly haunted by the vision of his dead wife, who, he said, used to appear before him with water-weeds twined in her long hair—"

"A second edition of Ophelia," murmured the Viscount, sotto voce.

"And water dripping from her garments," continued Mrs. Seymour, unmindful of the interruption. "Everything was done that could be thought of to exorcise the apparition, but nothing was of any avail, and the wretched man became raving mad, in which condition he died."

"And the wife—number one. I mean?"

"She still continues to haunt the 'Heron's Nest,' and it is said her voice is sometimes heard singing melancholy ditties in her Tower chamber."

"Really? The story interests me greatly. I must go to the mere, and see if the vision will appear to me."

"Lord St. Croix," said Mrs. Seymour, earnestly, "I want you to promise me not to set foot inside 'Heron's Nest.' I daresay you will laugh and think the request a foolish one, but there is an old prophecy which predicts danger for anyone connected with the family of Leigh who enters the place. You are not yet connected with the family—" she paused, and he filled in the sentence.

"But I may be some time? And you are timid on my behalf?"

"Yes."

"Do you know, Mrs. Seymour, you have very much surprised me!" he said. "I thought you were one of the most strong-minded of women, and quite above all such weaknesses as you have just confessed."

"Which shows that you are not yet acquainted with the various inconsistencies of my sex."

"Heaven forbid that I should pretend to such a depth of wisdom!" piously. "I am now more than ever convinced that the experience of a whole lifetime would be insufficient to give one the key to the

numerous complexities of feminine nature."

"Well, you will promise me, will you not?"

"Certainly, unless, indeed, that same supernatural power should throw its influence upon me, and drag me there against my will, in which case you must not hold me responsible for what ensues. If the spirit of the murdered lady has any of the attributes of Lurline, it would be quite useless for me to struggle against the spell."

"I see you are disposed to treat the whole matter as a joke, but I have your promise, and so I am satisfied. Let me make one more request—that you won't mention the subject either to Sir Trarvie or my daughter, for they are both sensitive, and it might disturb them."

He gave the required assurance willingly, and soon afterwards the party broke up for the night.

#### CHAPTER IV.

NOT many miles away from Woodleigh Court was situated Wyndham Abbey, the residence of Anthony Wyndham, Esquire, who, besides being the representative of one of the oldest families in the Kingdom, was certainly the richest man in the country.

The Abbey was a superb old place, with marble terraces leading down to sunny lawns, and stately avenues of trees that had perhaps sheltered the Franciscan monks in the old days when the Abbey had echoed to the sound of their chants, and the cloisters were trodden by their sandal-shod feet.

Inside it was equally magnificent, and full of art treasures, that had been collected chiefly by the present owner.

He is a widower, with one daughter, named Marjorie, and if you look in through the roses that partly enshroud the window of the breakfast-room, you will see them both seated at their morning meal, and you will probably think they make rather a pretty picture.

The early sunlight falls on the silver and cut glass, and delicate exotic flowers with which the table is decorated. It shines on the noble-looking old Squire, and on the bronze-coloured hair and sweet red and white bloom of Marjorie, who, attired in a dainty white cambric wrapper, is pouring out the coffee.

"I think it is going to be a fine day, and our tennis-party will be a success, papa," she said, glancing out of the window as she spoke. "I am very anxious to see Miss Seymour's lover, Lord St. Croix."

"Is he her lover?"

"Oh, yes; or, at least, everyone says she is going to marry him, so it is best to take for granted that he is in love with her. I have heard he is a charming young man!"

"Indeed! Well, he comes of a good stock, for Lord Dunmore and I were at Oxford together, and I remember him as one of the best fellows breathing. Ah!" as the door opened, and a footman entered, bearing a sealed bag on a salver, "here come the letters!"

The arrival of the letter-bag was always an occasion of much excitement to Marjorie, who, of course, had scores of girl-friends, and therefore received scores of girl's letters. This morning, however, there was nothing for her, and she was inclined to feel rather cross, that is to say, as cross as her sunny nature was capable of feeling.

Having finished her breakfast she got up and went through an open glass-door into the garden, where the roses and carnations



were all in blossom, and the air was heavy with the fragrance of their scent.

Some impulse induced her to turn round and look back at the Abbey, standing there in its gracious time-wrought beauty, and then her eyes wandered to the park, where deer were hiding in bracken almost as high as their heads.

"How lovely it all is!" she murmured to herself, whilst involuntary tears of deep feeling welled into her eyes. "If I had to leave it I think I should break my heart. However, there is no danger of that, for even if—"

She broke off blushing, and unwilling to complete her sentence, even in her own mind. What she meant was, that even if she married there would be no necessity for her to desert her old home, seeing that she was her father's only daughter, and therefore his heiress, so that if anything happened to him the Abbey would descend to her.

To wander down the shady avenue, whilst the sunlight pierced through the leaves, and fell in little dancing, tremulous shadows below, was delightful; and almost without knowing what she was doing, Marjorie extended her walk until she came to a plantation of oaks and beeches at the bottom of the park; and here she paused, standing just inside, and looking very intently at the trunk of a tree, on which someone had carved the name

"MARJORIE."

It was beautifully done, the letters were small and even, and the whole was surrounded with a little foliated scroll.

As the girl looked at it a deep bright red stained her cheeks, reaching even to neck and brow, and a tremulous smile played on her lips.

"I wonder," she said, half aloud, then checked herself suddenly, for there came the sound of a whistle, and a minute later a young man appeared in sight, who stopped short and raised his hat as he saw the dainty little white-robed form beside the beech tree.

"Good-morning, Mr. Fraser!" Marjorie said, recovering her self-possession, and acknowledging his salutation by a stately little bow. "You are out early this morning?"

"Yes; I was on my way to the Abbey to tell Mr. Wyndham that I have to leave for town to-day, and I came early because I thought I should be the more likely to catch him before he went out," responded the young man.

It should be explained that the chapel of the Abbey was in process of undergoing repairs; and the Squire, wishing its restoration should be a masterpiece of art, had employed one of the most celebrated architects of the day to make plans.

He, however, being engaged in the restoration of some cathedral, had sent his most promising pupil, Roy Fraser, to take his place; and assuredly Squire Wyndham found nothing to grumble at in the exchange, for Roy was artistic to his finger tips, and took the most enthusiastic interest in his work.

"You are going away to-day!" repeated Marjorie, slowly, while she carefully abstained from meeting his gaze, and kept her eyes fixed on the moss at her feet.

"Yes. You see I have done all here that it is absolutely necessary for me to do, and the foreman is quite capable of seeing that the rest of the work is properly carried to a successful issue. My employer has a commission for the restoration of a church abroad, and I have to go to superintend it."

There was a pause of some moments'

duration, then Marjorie said, in a tone that she tried hard to render playful,—

"I suppose you are really glad to get away from this dull, country place, Mr. Fraser?"

"On the contrary, I deeply regret the necessity that forces me to leave," he replied, gravely, while his honest grey eyes looked very wistfully into hers.

He was not, strictly speaking, a handsome man, but he was tall and well formed, and there was a certain power of intellect—a latent strength—in his face, that at once singled him out from the crowd. He and Marjorie had seen a good deal of each other, for the Squire had taken a fancy to the young architect, and often invited him to luncheon or dinner.

"We shall miss you," the young girl said, presently; and as she spoke she broke off a spray of honeysuckle that was waving its tendrils in the soft breeze, and began pulling off the petals one by one.

His face lighted up into eager joy.

"Shall you? I am rejoiced to hear it, for one of the worst trials of going away is the fear that one may be soon forgotten. I need hardly say that my visit to Wyndham-stowe will remain in my memory like—"

"An oasis in the desert?" put in Marjorie, mischievously, her own self-control coming back as she noticed the thrill of deep feeling that quivered in his voice.

"I was not going to make use of that time-honoured simile," he returned, with a smile; "nevertheless, as it expresses my feelings pretty accurately, I will allow it to stand. By-the-bye, Miss Wyndham, I can with justice repeat your accusation of being out early."

"I came into the plantation because I wanted some moss for decorating the table to-night, and a brilliant inspiration seized me of placing flowers in moss instead of in vases. Don't you think it would look pretty?"

"Very pretty indeed."

"And," continued Marjorie, a deep blush rising to her cheeks, "as I was passing this tree, I suddenly observed that someone had been taking liberties with my name. Do you see what has been carved?"

She stepped aside so that the graven name might be visible, and as she did so kept her eyes fixed on his face. The sudden look of consciousness that came upon it did not escape her, and in a different tone she added,—

"Can you help me to guess who did it?"

He parried her question with another.

"Are you angry that such a liberty has been taken, Miss Wyndham?"

"Answer me, and then I will answer you," she oracularly remarked.

"Then I confess myself the delinquent."

"You, Mr. Fraser?"

"I, Miss Wyndham."

"But," said Marjorie, who, although conscious that she was treading on delicate ground, could not bring herself to desert personalities for the less interesting, but safer, general topics, "it must have taken a long while to cut all those letters, and I was given to understand your time was valuable?"

He did not reply, and the mischievous sparkle deepened in the girl's eyes.

"It is a pity you wasted so long on such a useless work," she continued, banteringly.

"Think how many plans you might have drawn in the time, and how much money you would have earned!"

A deep red mounted to the young man's brow, and he drew himself up with some dignity. Sensitive in the highest degree, he imagined she was laughing at him, as she would never have laughed at a man socially her equal.

"Although I am poor, Miss Wyndham, my sole idea does not consist in earning money. I will not detain you any longer. Good-morning."

He took off his hat, and would have passed on, but she, conscious from the hurt tone of his voice that she had wounded his pride, put out her hand to detain him.

"Stay a minute, Mr. Fraser; I am afraid I have offended you."

He paused, but made no answer.

"Was I rude?" she continued, looking up at him with shy contrition. "If so, I am very sorry, and I did not mean to do it. Won't you forgive me?"

She laid her hand timidly on his arm, and he, acting on a sudden impulse, which was too strong to be resisted, raised it to his lips and covered it with kisses.

A minute later, and he seemed to become aware of the impropriety of which he had been guilty, and drew back, folding his arms across his breast.

"It is my turn to ask forgiveness now, and my crime is such that I can hardly hope to obtain it," he said, speaking very quickly, as though he were determined not to give himself time for reflection or repentance. "But you tempted me more than I was able to bear, and you shall hear the truth. I love you, Miss Wyndham—Marjorie! For so I may call you for this once. I know, quite as well as you can tell me, the mad folly of which I have been—nay, am still—guilty; but feelings are not to be measured by conventionalities, and, although I know how far below you I am in everything of which the world takes cognisance, yet for this one moment my love shall raise me to your level. I have neither wealth, fame, nor a noble name to offer you, but I have health and strength and something else which it would be presumptuous of me to call talent, but by whose aid I hope to carve out a future. If I succeed, Marjorie—if in the years to come I should have found the golden key which unlocks the door of wealth, and I came and laid it at your feet, what would you say to me?"

He came a step nearer, and bent down until his breath fell hotly on her cheek. The petals of the flower she had been playing with lay in fragments at her feet, her fingers still held the stem, and he saw that they trembled.

"What would you say to me, Marjorie?" he repeated, finding she did not speak; and as he asked the question he very gently put his hand on her arm.

She made no effort at withdrawal.

Her cheeks grew alternately red and white, and at last she lifted her eyes, and in their liquid depths he read his answer.

Will you blame him if, for the moment he forgot all his good resolutions, and yielded a second time to a great temptation?

Uttering a low cry, partly of surprise, and partly of joy, he took her in his arms, and holding her close against his breast, showered down kisses on her cheeks, her lips, her hair.

At last Marjorie withdrew herself, blushing deeply, and smoothing down her ruffled love-locks, while Fraser hardly knew whether to believe in the reality of the joy that had befallen him.

"It seems too good to be true," he said, "and yet you are too sweet and pure to play me false. Listen, darling! I am not in a position to go to your father and ask him to consent to our engagement, for I have absolutely nothing but what I earn myself, and that as yet is very little. I am hoping great things from this journey to the Continent, and when I return it may be I shall have some settled prospects. Will you consent to a provisional engagement between us in the meanwhile?"

"No," Marjorie replied, firmly. "I will do nothing secret and unknown to my father. If, as you say, you are not in a position to approach him at present, we must wait until better fortune dawns upon you."

"And while I am away, perhaps some other suitor will approach you," he said, jealously.

"If he does, it will be only to be sent away. Can't you trust me, Roy?" she continued, softly. "I have told you I loved you, and love is with me a sacred thing; nothing will ever make me change."

"Are you sure of this?" eagerly.

"Quite—quite sure."

"Then why will you not become engaged to me?"

"Because I should be deceiving my father, and to that I will never consent."

In spite of his passion, Fraser was bound to confess that she was right, and so he made no further efforts to persuade her, but contented himself with her promise to be true.

And so, after awhile they parted, both hearts beating with the purest elixir of life, the love that comes with youth, and which while its freshness lasts, is like the alchemist's crucible, transmuting everything that comes within the range of its influence into richest gold!

#### CHAPTER V.

WYNDHAM ABBEY looked its best that afternoon, with the June sun shining down on the velvet-smooth lawns, across which the tennis nets were stretched, and ladies in gaily-coloured dresses were tripping about, racket in hand. Men in white flannel suits, with coloured silk handkerchiefs round their waists, and different hue "blazers," helped to lend an animation to the scene that the masculine sex does not often provide; while the flower-beds, blazing with the scarlet of geraniums, and the azure of lobelias, showed up vividly against the dark green of the shrubs which edged the lawn.

Lord St. Croix was there, ready to play or make himself useful in handing round cups of tea and baskets of strawberries, but Ermentrude contented herself with sitting on a garden seat, and surveying the scene with the conscious pride of one who knows she is not only the handsomest, but the best dressed woman there.

She wore some delicate dove-coloured costume, trimmed with swansdown, and from the shoulder to her waist was a long spray of deep red roses, the left relieved by maidenhair fern, while two or three of the same lovely flowers wreathed her big Gainsborough hat.

Marjorie, in her simple white gown, presented a great contrast to Miss Seymour, and at once made a favourable impression on Lord St. Croix, who thought her the very ideal of a sweet English maiden.

"I am sure you must be tired after all your exertions," he said to her, later on in the afternoon. "You have been running about providing for the pleasures of your guests, and quite careless of fatiguing yourself!"

"As to that," she returned, brightly, "I don't know what fatigue is, and," she added, simply, "nothing gives me so much pleasure as seeing that other people are happy. But how is it you are not playing tennis?"

"I have played three sets."

"And you have found them enough?"

"For one afternoon—yes. Now pray let me bring you some refreshments—claret-cup or tea?"

"Oh! tea, if you please. I am a regular woman in my love of the beverage that cheers but does not inebriate."

He went away, returning with a cup and saucer and a plate of strawberries. During his absence Marjorie had discovered that her flowers had fallen to pieces, so she gathered a spray of roses and some geraniums, and was fastening them together when he came up.

"Have you such a thing as a knife to cut the thorns off?" she asked; and, in reply, he produced one from his pocket, having first deposited his burden on a rustic table at her side.

As he pulled out the knife something else was dragged with it, and fell on the ground at Marjorie's feet. It was the locket which had been given him by the beautiful unknown.

A low exclamation of astonishment broke from Marjorie's lips, and before he could prevent her she had picked up the ornament, and examined it attentively.

"Where did you get this from?" she exclaimed, turning upon him in breathless surprise, and quite oblivious of the fact that there might, be anything rude in the question.

He hesitated, hardly knowing how to reply.

"It was lent to me," he said at last, rather awkwardly.

"Lent you?" By its owner?"

"I suppose so."

"By Irene Duval, do you mean?"

"Is her name Irene Duval?" he exclaimed, eagerly, thinking that here might be found some clue to the mystery that had perplexed him so greatly.

"It was to Irene Duval that I gave that locket two years ago. I was at school with her in Belgium, and when I was leaving I asked her to accept the locket as a keepsake. I never thought she would part with it," added Marjorie, in a hurt tone.

"She did not part with it willingly, but from necessity," St. Croix said, feeling himself called upon to defend his lovely incognito. "I wish you would tell me all you know about her."

"I have done so already, for I know nothing beyond the fact that we were at school together, and that she was the sweetest and prettiest girl I ever knew. I have written to her several times since I came home, but I have never received an answer. I expect she was not allowed to have any letters, for the rules of the school were very strict—it was almost a convent, in fact."

"And who were her friends?"

"She was an orphan, I believe, and the only relation I ever heard her speak of was a certain Madame Henry, who had been to see her once or twice."

"She was English?"

"Who! Irene? Oh, yes, I believe so, and she had been at the school since she was a very tiny child. She never went away for her holidays even."

Lord St. Croix put no more queries, perhaps because he thought that his companion would be unable to answer them. Looking up he found Marjorie's eyes fixed upon him inquiringly, and he determined to answer the unasked question.

"I think, Miss Wyndham, I may trust you," he began.

"In what way, Lord St. Croix?" she said, gravely.

"I mean that you will not betray the confidence I am about to repose in you. It is not for my own sake that I ask you to keep a secret, but for the sake of your friend, who I think must have been reduced to very dire straits when accident threw us together."

And then he related all that had happened on the night we were introduced to him.

Marjorie listened with deepest attention,

and when he had finished tears stood in her eyes, but her woman's wit at once helped to a conclusion that had escaped him.

"Oh! Lord St. Croix, she had run away from school, and was, perhaps, on her way here!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands together in the intensity of her eagerness.

"Don't you think it probable?"

"It is possible," he returned, "but if that were the case, how is it you have seen nothing of her?"

Marjorie shook her head, and was silent.

"I should be afraid something had happened to her," she said at length. "There was always a sort of mystery about her ever since I can remember. She was different to the other girls. She had no home, wrote no letters, and never received any; she never had any pocket money, or birthday presents, except such as her schoolfellows gave her. I think we all had a feeling that she was not exactly as we were."

"And what conclusion do you draw from all this?" asked the Viscount, deeply interested.

"None; except that if ill had befallen her, there would be no one to make inquiries or to care whether she was alive or dead. I wish I were a man," energetically, "and then I would discover her whereabouts myself!"

St. Croix smiled at her warmth, but was, nevertheless, affected by it.

"Will you appoint me your deputy?" he asked, and he could have hardly told whether he was in jest or earnest. She, however, took him at his word.

"Will you go?" she cried, her cheeks glowing red with excitement. "If so you will indeed be performing a deed of chivalrous kindness; and I, personally, can never be sufficiently grateful to you for it. But how will you begin your inquiries?"

"I cannot tell yet, I must think over the circumstances, and then come to some conclusion."

"And you will let me hear how you succeed?"

"Certainly. Directly I find out anything definite I will communicate with you."

Just then Marjorie had to leave him to attend to her duties as hostess. The entire responsibility of entertaining the guests devolved upon her, for the Squire had retired to his study, and locked himself in, alleging a headache as an excuse for his non-appearance.

Marjorie, rather anxious on his behalf, hastened to the study directly her last visitor had departed. Outside the door she paused, thinking of the scene that had taken place in the wood that morning, and wondering whether her father would notice any difference in her appearance.

Her tap at the door was unanswered, so she knocked again rather loudly.

"Who is there?" queried the Squire, and his voice sounded strange and hoarse to his daughter's ears.

"It is I—Marjorie."

He unlocked the door, and then she entered, but paused on the threshold, shocked at the change that had taken place in her father's appearance since the morning. His face was white and drawn, his eyes were bloodshot, his whole demeanour indicated agitation.

"Papa! What is the matter?" the girl exclaimed, all remembrance of her own personal concerns vanishing in her anxiety on his behalf. "Are you ill?"

"No," he replied, seating himself with an air of languor, although he had not been out all day, and so ought not to have been tired. "I am not ill, but I am in trouble."

"What sort of trouble, papa? What—"



ever it is you must let me share it with you."

He looked at her for a moment, then drew a deep sigh.

"Yes, you must know, and the sooner the better. Read this."

He took a letter from the table, and put it in her hands. It ran as follows:—

"DEAR SIR,—Some few days ago we received a letter from Mr. James Crowther, Solicitor, on behalf of a client who claims to be the only son of the late Geoffrey Wyndham—your uncle—who was supposed to have died in Australia some years ago. Fancying the claim might be some impudent attempt to extort money, we did not think it worth while to trouble you on the subject; but yesterday Mr. Crowther—having procured an appointment for an interview—called and showed us documents, which, if genuine—and we have no reason to doubt the fact—convince us past doubt that Mr. Geoffrey Wyndham, instead of dying unmarried, was the husband of a certain Antoinette Marsh, and the father of a son called after himself, 'Geoffrey.'"

"It is this person who now comes forward to contest your claim to the Wyndham estates, and who has already commenced an action in the Court of Chancery. Deeply as we regret it, we really cannot conscientiously advise you to fight the action, for we are, in our own minds, convinced that the claimant has a legal right to the estates, and this being so, resistance would make your case so much the worse. Awaiting your instructions,—We are, dear sir, yours faithfully,

"GRAVES AND WHITMAN."

Marjorie read the letter twice, then laid it down and looked at her father.

"I don't quite understand," she said knitting her brows together in a puzzled fashion. "Who is this Geoffrey Wyndham, and what does his claim mean?"

"I will tell you; but, first of all, I must explain that I inherited the estates from a great uncle, whose name was Rufus Wyndham. My father had a brother older than himself, called Geoffrey; and Geoffrey, being a wild rascally, extravagant sort of young man, was shipped off to the colonies before he was twenty years of age. The fact was, that he had been in a merchant's office, and had forged a cheque for a large amount, which his family, to prevent exposure and disgrace, paid. They, however, held the threat over his head, that if ever he returned to England he should be prosecuted, and so he never did return. At that time no one ever thought he would be heir to Wyndham Abbey, for my great uncle had two sons, and their lives were better than Geoffrey's, for they were much younger. However, they both caught typhus fever, and it killed them, upon which their father, who had been a widower for some time, married again in the hope of having children. His hope was disappointed, but he, himself, lived to a good old age, and at his death the estates descended to me, as we had heard nothing from Geoffrey, and consequently supposed him to be dead. Of course, advertisements were put in home and foreign newspapers, but they elicited no response, and so I took possession. That occurred twenty-five years ago, and naturally, I have always regarded myself as undisputed owner of the Abbey. If this claim be genuine, I have no more right to it than the veriest stable boy in my employ; but oh! it will be hard to leave my old home, which I love as dearly as my life!"

His composure broke down, and the last words ended in a sob.

Marjorie rubbed her fresh young cheek against his withered one, and did her best to soothe him. Having partially succeeded, she said,—

"But you must not talk in this hopeless way, papa, dear. Possession is nine-tenths of the law, you know!"

"Yes; but if this man is the rightful heir I must not try to keep him out of his property."

"Certainly not, only the chances are that he is an impostor, for if Geoffrey Wyndham had left a son you may depend upon it he would not have been so long urging his claim."

"You see what the lawyers say," he answered, despondingly. "They are convinced of the genuineness of the documents he brings forward."

"Lawyers are not infallible; in fact, they often make more mistakes than other people. At all events, we will not despair until we are quite sure we shall leave the Abbey."

Her own voice trembled as she spoke, and she turned round quickly so that her father should not see the tears in her eyes. Presently, however, she was her own brave self again.

"We must go to London, papa," she said, putting her arm caressingly round his shoulder, "and then we will go to the lawyers—you and I—and hear what they have to say. There is nothing like looking a difficulty full in the face. Half its terrors disappear when it is valorously confronted, and so we will prove. Meanwhile, let me write to Messrs. Graves and Whitman, and tell them of our intended visit, and then we must try and forget this claim for a while, and believe that no one can take our beautiful Abbey from us!"

(To be continued next week.)

## WE TWO.

We two make home of any place we go;

We two find joy in any kind of weather;  
Or if the earth is clothed in bloom or snow,  
If summer days invite, or bleak winds blow,

What matters it if we two are together?

We two, we two, we make our world our weather.

We two make banquets of the plainest fare;  
In every cup we find the thrill of pleasure;

We hide with wreaths the burrowed brow of care,

And win to smiles the set lips of despair.

For us life always moves with lilting measure;

We two, we two, we make our joy, our pleasure.

We two find youth renewed with every dawn;

Each day holds something of an unknown glory,

We waste no thought on grief or pleasure gone;

Tricked out like hope, time leads us on and on,

And thrums upon his harp new song or story.

We two, we two, we find the paths of glory.

We two make heaven here on this little earth;

We do not need to wait for realms eternal.

We know the use of tears, know sorrow's worth,

And pain for us is always love's rebirth.

Our paths lead closely by the paths supernal;

We two, we two, we live in love eternal.

E. W. W.

## Gleanings

THE game of chess is taught in the public schools of Australia.

TELEPHONIC communication is about to be established between England and Belgium.

THE pay of a Chinese soldier is about two and one-half cents a day, and his fighting qualities would be dear at half a cent a month.

A GERMAN physician asserts that the wearing of veils causes red noses. The injury results from the constant friction of the veil on the skin.

IF your hall is narrow, place a mirror opposite the parlor door. This helps out by reflection the very narrow space often given to this part of the house.

BATS are usually able to find their way without the use of their eyes. A blind bat has been known to avoid wires and other obstructions as easily as though it had perfect sight.

A WISE man never trims the hair that grows in the ear of his horse. He knows that Nature intended it to protect the orifice from dust, insects, &c., and sudden atmospheric changes.

THE veterinary surgeons of London favour the abolition of street drinking troughs for horses. It is asserted that the troughs are most pernicious agencies in the dissemination of glanders.

IT is said that telegraph and telephone wires are better conductors on Monday than on Saturday, because of their comparative rest on Sunday. A rest of three weeks, it is asserted, adds ten per cent. to their conductivity.

KEEP your razor out of the sunlight. It has long been known that fine-edged tools assume a blue colour and lose all temper if they are exposed for any considerable length of time to the light of the sun, either in winter or summer.

THE most extraordinary feats in penmanship are recorded of Rila Kittridge, of Belfast. He wrote 46,000 words on an ordinary postal card. It is asserted that on four postal cards he wrote the entire text of the New Testament—about 181,000 words.

THE highest priced watch made in Geneva, Switzerland, costs about £30. Fractional parts of a second are recorded, it strikes the hours and quarters, and plays three tunes. With gems to ornament the case, the value can, of course, be increased to any extent.

SNOW-WATER, the product of melted snow. It was long thought, was the purest of all water. This idea has been proved incorrect as the reverse is the case. Snow is really a purifier of the atmosphere, attracting from it, as it falls, various impurities; and these are found in the snow-water.

SEVERAL articles regularly disappeared from the pockets of overcoats which hung in a London Clubhouse, and among them were numerous cigars. An expert detective delicately touched a score or more of cigars with an aniline dye. A day or two later the tinted lips of a club servant exposed the rogue.

IN the interest of healthy children, there is in Minnesota a constantly growing belief that marriages should not be permitted unless the principals are each provided with a doctor's certificate attesting their good health and freedom from organic disease. In Alabama, public opinion favours the enactment of a law to prevent habitual drunkards from entering the marriage state.

## Society

MAY 17th was the fifteenth birthday of Alfonso XIII., King of Spain and the Indies; and has he succeeded to the Crown at his birth, some six months after the death of his father, Alfonso XII., he is of considerable seniority as a Sovereign, though he is the youngest occupant of a throne. Through his mother, the Queen-Regent, who was an Austrian Archduchess, he is descended from our George II.; through his father he springs from the "legitimate" branch of the Stuarts. Though his throne is claimed by Don Carlos, his hereditary right is unassailable, as he represents the eldest son of Charles IV., while the pretender represents a younger son, and the right of women to succeed was formerly restored by the Cortes shortly before the birth of his grandmother, Isabella II.

THE DUCHESS OF YORK accepted several Queensland opals during her Australian visit. She has done so with pleasure, moreover, having no superstitions about the stones whose unique beauty the names of Mary Queen Scots and Henrietta Maria have strangely linked with misfortune. The King does not share his daughter-in-law's devotion to the opal, and the prevalence of the prejudice against it was manifested to his Majesty by the many letters of entreaty and remonstrance which reached him during the time of talk about the addition of an opal to the Crown jewels. To one such letter from a popular novelist a reply has lately been received to the effect that his Majesty will not add in this regard to the uneasiness of any of his subjects as to the head which wears a crown.

THE KING has decided that his eldest daughter will not bear the title of "Princess Royal" during the life of Queen Victoria's eldest daughter, the Empress Frederick. The title was invented by George II., in favour of his eldest daughter Anne, who married the Prince of Orange, and died in 1759. The next Princess Royal was the eldest daughter of George III., who was born in 1766, married the first King of Wurtemberg, and died, a childless widow, in 1823. The Empress Frederick, first-born child of Queen Victoria, was the next and present holder of the title.

THE Tsar of Russia, who is thirty-four years of age, is the heir of a sad crown, none of his predecessors of his own family, except his grandfather, Alexander II. (who was blown to pieces in the public streets), having lived beyond the fifties. He has the consolation, however, of knowing that the life-rate of his family is improving, the first males since Peter the Great who lived to be seventy having been sons of Nicholas I., the Tsar who waged the Crimean-war with us.

QUEEN HELENA has been much more popular with the Italian people since it became known that she was about to become a mother. The Queen, at the time of her marriage, was coldly received, in spite of her beauty. Her appearance did not please the Italians. She is very dark, sallow almost to yellowness, and although tall and graceful, appears stiff and self-contained, with a melancholy expression of countenance. The people contrasted her unfavourably with Queen Margherita, and were dissatisfied with her rank. Moreover, she was spoken of as a "childless mountain girl." Now that she is apparently no longer to be childless, the feelings of the Italians have changed towards her, and the young Queen is regarded with considerable favour.

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## Statistics

A SUBMARINE torpedo-boat is about to be launched. It is of the American (Holland) type, about 54 feet long, with a weight of 70 tons, and a speed of 10 knots above and 8 knots below water. Each boat will carry a crew of seven men and the armament will consist of five torpedoes.

From a parliamentary return just issued it appears that the *Lucania* holds the record for carrying the mails between Queenstown and New York having performed the journey in 5 days 21 hours 40 minutes. The *Deutschland* has done the journey from Southampton in 6 days and 30 minutes.

The commissariat arrangements of a great steamship company almost equal in magnitude those of a small army. The North German Lloyd is the third largest concern of the kind in the world, and its bill for food and drink last year ran up to almost half a million sterling. Fresh beef alone represented nearly 4,000,000lb., and 23,250 carcasses of lamb were used. Other items in the butcher's bill were: 322,621lb. of fresh pork; 455,481lb. of veal; 455,292lb. of mutton; 6,358 calves' heads; 44,368 calves' sweetbreads; 49,421lb. of livers, tongues, and kidneys; 612,708lb. of salt beef; 391,589lb. of pickled pork; 414,433lb. of preserved beef; mutton, and brawn, 17,092 hams, and 86,494lb. of sausage. Fresh fish and salted herrings were provided by the thousand, and preserved fishes, such as the tunny and the sardine, amounted to 50,000lb. Turtles, smoked salmon, fresh oysters, lobsters, and other shellfish were in proportion, and fowls were counted by the ten thousand.

## Gems

If a man is unable to find a reason for doing a mean act he invents an excuse.

DELIBERATE with caution, but act with decision; yield with graciousness, but oppose with firmness.

It is one thing to survey yourself with pride, and quite another to explore your heart with humility.

WRITE your name in kindness, love and mercy on the hearts of those who come in contact with you, and you will never be forgotten. Good deeds will shine as brightly on the earth as the stars in Heaven.

THE past remains with us to remind us of our perils and our constant need of help, but it ought not to haunt and oppress us. The real life of an aspiring soul is always ahead. We are not fleeing from the devil, but seeking God.

IN doing our very best to be good ourselves we bring tremendous unconscious influence to bear on every one around us. No one can meet a man who transparently and constantly tries to do his duty without being either spurred or shamed by the encounter.

A THOUSAND times to come short of the mark of the high calling, and yet to have courage, is a noble result. If we are not frustrated a thousand times we have no strength. The buckler is brightened by scouring, the sword is sharpened by grinding. To attain courage is a noble achievement. To sink down into limpness and invertebrate acceptance of the thing called fate, to be a moral jellyfish instead of a highly organized human being, with a bold power of resistance and defiance, is to become unworthy of the powers given us by Nature.

## Helpful Talks

BY THE EDITOR.

The Editor is pleased to hear from his readers at any time.

All letters must give the name and address of the writers, not for publication, but as a guarantee of good faith.

ESTHER.—It would be unwise, indeed, for you to attempt to dye a silk dress. Better send it to a professional dyer.

J. W. P.—Marriage with the sister of a deceased wife is not legal in this country. In nearly every other country there is no legal prohibition of such marriages.

CHARLES L.—The lines quoted appear in William Wordsworth's poem of "Tintern Abbey":

"That best portion of a good man's life,  
His little, nameless, unremembered  
acts  
Of kindness and of love."

MARY.—In the case, you name a childless widow has no claim upon the estate of her late husband's mother at the decease of the latter. If there were children, they would be entitled to the father's share in his mother's property. The surviving children of the mother, in the absence of a will, take all the estate.

EMMA.—The young man is evidently trifling with you. His ideas of matrimony, as expressed to you, were certainly rude, not to say offensive. He is not of the marrying kind, and it would be advisable for you to at once break off the intimacy which has made him a regular visitor at your home.

DOROTHY.—For a sensitive skin, almond meal is, in some cases, preferable to soap. It is thus prepared: orris root, in fine powder, four ounces; wheat flour, four ounces; powdered white castile soap, one ounce; borax, in fine powder, one ounce; oil of bitter almonds, five drops; oil of bergamot, two fluid drachms; tincture of musk, one-half fluid drachm. Mix well and pass through a sieve. This leaves the complexion clear, soft and velvety.

L. L. WELLS.—I know nothing of the "barbers' college" to which you refer. Your best plan to learn the tonsorial art would be to put yourself under the instruction of some competent barber in your neighbourhood, who, in a short time, if you are naturally adapted for the business, would be able to make you a skilful workman. In this way would be avoided the expense of coming to the metropolis, and the outlay for your maintenance while an apprentice.

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KENWOOD.—The present of a coffin to Lord Nelson is a historical fact. It was not the result of eccentricity on the part of the donor, his old comrade, Admiral Hallowell, but the expression of an earnest wish that he might be buried in one of his own trophies. Nelson set up the coffin in his cabin; but after a time sent it below in deference to the feelings of his crew. The coffin was made from the mainmast of the ship *L'Orient*, and was the one in which he was eventually buried.

A., CHESTER.—About seven-tenths of the books printed in this country are fiction. The sales of the booksellers show that much more reading is done in cool weather than in the summer. This is accounted for by the discomfort of being outdoors when the air is chilly and unpleasant; then people remain at home and turn to books for entertainment. In the summer vast numbers of people seek recreation in the open air, and many engage in sports. It is true that during the warm months, when vacation from business gives opportunity for rustication and recuperation, no one thinks of going to the country without a supply of literature to enable him to delightfully pass leisure hours that would otherwise prove irksome. Still there is far more reading done in cool weather than when the temperature is warm.

**London  
Reader**

**SPOT COUPON.**

June 15th, 1901.

**Mrs. ALINGHAM.**—My advice is to shun speculating in stock and shares, keep clear of outside brokers, and avoid risking your money with the hope of profiting by advances in stocks. They are just as likely to fall as to rise. The wisest heads have sometimes made the most fatal mistakes, even after years of experience in the stock market; and how can you, an inexperienced woman, expect to win where so many shrewd heads have failed? Besides, it is well to remember that among brokers there are numerous tricksters who occasionally give advice which is intended to benefit themselves at the expense of their clients. Keep your money in the savings bank, where you can be assured of being able to withdraw it whenever you require it. The interest may be low, but your investment is always secure.

**SARAH KELLY.**—This recipe for potato croquettes has been recommended: To one pint of mashed potatoes add the beaten yolks of two eggs, two tablespoonful of milk, one teaspoonful of onion juice, one teaspoonful of salt, one level teaspoonful of butter, one tablespoonful of chopped parsley, and a little grated nutmeg. Stir this over the fire until hot; it should be quite a stiff mixture. Spread on a platter, and when cold divide into as many portions as are to be served, form into small cylinders. Roll each one in beaten egg, then in bread crumbs. Dip the frying basket into the hot fat, then lay in four or five croquettes. When the fat is very hot, lower the basket carefully. When they are brown, place them on brown paper to drain. Arrange them on a folded napkin, and garnish with parsley.

**NELLIE.**—As there is little hope of a reconciliation between you and your former lover, and as he has been so ungentlemanly as to ask for a return of the presents he gave you, pride should prompt you to accede to his request. No letter should accompany them. Let your silence express the contempt you feel for the man who is so mean as to regret his generosity.

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